# THE END OF REASON

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*by*

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# APOLOGIA

*In the Name of God, the Most Pure, the Most Pure*

I have drawn out my heart. In a golden basin filled with ice water I have washed three chambers pure. I have concealed the fourth chamber. It is the cause of my shame and I have hidden it from all except God, from Whom nothing is hidden.

From three temples I have driven out the demons of fanaticism, ignorance and depravity. In the fourth they have taken refuge together. I lack strength enough to exorcise them, except that God may aid me.

These are my three daughters, as beautiful as stars in the Pleiades. The fourth I have veiled in her shroud, fit for the tomb.

Life will end, yet these three may live a little more yet. They are safe from the ravages of age. They are untouched by the sorrows and afflictions of this world. If any one is fair to you, renounce me, for you love the daughter, not the father who raised her. If you find fault with any one, renounce me, for her faults are the failings of the father who raised her. If you remember the one who raised them, remember him with a prayer. His three daughters cannot pray for him. They are friends to the afflicted, consorts to the grieving; they are my beloved children.

If the moon has not risen in your heart's firmament, these are three lanterns along this dark road. When the sun rises for you, put them aside.

If you cling to my words when that sun blazes before you, then you have made *a grave mistake* and committed *a grievous transgression.*

If you have spoken with Balaam, you will bless Moses. If you have heard John, you will turn to Jesus. Do not exchange the Joseph of your search for a few dirham. Or are you the seeker who

follows the star, yet speaks shamefully to Mary? *You have surely committed a monstrous thing!*

Among those authors who have knowledge and seek God's pleasure, by comparison this author is ignorant and caught up too much in what pleases himself. He possesses neither esoteric knowledge nor an exalted place with Him. He is debased and cast down. For his ugliness, he disowns beauty. He is ashamed and would not defile these books by placing his hand upon them or associating his name with them.

*For ten years I have cultivated a garden,*
*But a few roses are all I have to offer.*

Still, I have wanted my name to be remembered and am proud that I have been the father of these three. But Khidr, whose name I have invoked, has rebuked me for this, saying, "I look upon the devices and inventions of man, the monuments built by men to glorify themselves, the achievements of men greater, more virtuous, and more powerful than you. All of this has been effaced before, and again before that, and will be yet again when you and your children are dead and your names, like scratches in sand, wiped away clean. I marvel at your pride in earthly accomplishment, as though you might carry pride, or wealth, or joy with you to Sheol."

I was asked once by a well-intentioned friend, "Why do you write about God? If you want wealth or a position of importance or public recognition, you are wasting your time. Instead, you stalk Him and hunt after His signs. Why are your thoughts so taken with Him?"

I answered, "I am ashamed of every thought devoted to any other, yet you would have me put Him out of my mind. What else is there to write about? When my thoughts stray from Him, this

pen runs dry. While I may reach the sea by any number of rivers, why would I seek a river when the sea is in sight?"

Many mariners and boatmen have charted this course; I do well to follow them, though I follow far behind and with less skill. Here I have told their stories and mine. I have mingled my prayers with their own and hope that I have added what pleases God and have not offended my betters and forebears. I spoke once with Rumi who was feasting with friends in the shade of a rose bower. I was permitted to approach him and for a moment allowed to speak. I said, "I am a mimic of you. I am a pale copy and a counterfeit, though I never intended to steal stories from your mouth."

Rumi laughed and was in good spirits. He said, "Those stories are no more my property than the clothes of my youth or the tables at which I ate. We kept company together awhile. When I died, God scattered those words like diamonds over the earth. Pick them up and set them in brilliant settings and you will have eulogized me and my teachers and will have given three fine gifts to the Lord of Glory, though no gift can ever befit Him."

He said, "Remember the words I borrowed from my friend Attar; and those words he and I both borrowed from Sanai. Those stories that belonged to us we also borrowed. All things are originally from His Hand. If you give more than you have taken, God will forgive you. But do not make the mistake Hallaj once made."

Hallaj's son made report of his father and spoke freely of his father's execution. God had revealed an attribute of Himself to Hallaj, but Hallaj made it a boast. The Woolcarder had loosened the bonds of attachment to all things but himself. For this reason, God tested Hallaj with ridicule and torture and the certainty of death. Even the friends of Hallaj and his disciples turned their backs on him. Did their betrayal torment him more even than the instruments his enemies used to mutilate him?

In a vision, the Woolcarder shone like a sun before me. He said, "You wonder at me. Why?"

I said, "Did you deserve the punishment you received? Were you angry that the order came from those who were once your friends?"

He said, "My execution was well-deserved. I was not angry with my friends; not with Jonaid who affirmed the order, not Shebli who threw mud at me as they led me to the gibbet. They were my friends; they are my friends still. I embrace them. When they cut off my hands, I performed my ablutions with my own blood. When they hacked off my feet, I crawled before His throne. When they put out my eyes, I saw only His Face. When they cut out my tongue, His name was still upon my lips. When they cut off my head and burned me to ashes and scattered me to the winds, I loved God still. For this, He answered all my prayers. He loved me and I loved Him. He removed the veil of the world from my mutilated eyes. He fulfilled the promise I made when I cried out 'I am the Truth' by utterly destroying me. I prophesied my union with Him and the people arose to punish my blasphemy; yet through their punishment, my prophecy and His promise came to pass."

These are the words Hallaj spoke to me. God forgive me for loving him.

Hallaj lives and I am dead. But God stands astride the world of the living and the dead and He may yet breathe life into my corpse. Everywhere He stands among us, though He comes too subtly for dull senses to detect. He will turn me in my path and will set the world aright and will stand before my eyes, or be cradled in my arms, and yet I have said, "Nowhere that I looked did I find Him." Judge between Him and me. The madness is in me—it was never in Him!

Here we come to the end of reason. Put these devices of mind and perception aside. With these, you will not grasp Him, you will not see Him.

This world is a house of deceit, supported by two columns: fanaticism and depravity. These seeming opposites are friends to ignorance and companions together in the destruction of human life and in the ruin of men's souls.

A man of few means and disagreeable disposition was in love with a well-liked and attractive woman. One day a friend asked him if he was planning to attend a gathering she had arranged for the evening. She had invited her many friends and acquaintances. He responded with surprise, and said, "No, she said nothing to me."

His friend said, "I'm sure you would be welcome."

He said, "I don't go where I'm not invited."

His friend berated him, "How can you expect that she would invite you? At every previous opportunity, with each prior invitation, you have refused. If you have rejected enough invitations, they cease finally to invite you."

He said, "This is true, but my heart burns nevertheless to be excluded."

From His invitation, do not risk exclusion, but do not imagine that His invitations to you will ever cease or ever be withdrawn.

He has hung Iblis on the cross of disappointment. Iblis cried out, "For whom have I been sacrificed? He grants free will and demands, 'You must have no will that is not Mine.' He speaks in parables and requires 'You will not question Me.' He has fed His lovers to ravenous wolves. No wolf devoured Joseph, but every day those transfixed by Joseph's beauty are devoured. He made Joseph the form of Zuleika's single desire. How terrible a punishment this is for one who had not offended before."

"What prisoner does not protest the rule of such laws by which he is condemned? I am a prisoner; I ask for clemency. Will He not grant it? I ask for lenience and forgiveness. Will He not permit it? I am aware of my transgressions and am utterly lost. Will He not accept me?"

While he struggled, he asked me to give him a little water to drink. He said, “I cannot kiss Him with the taste of these words in my mouth.”

I granted his wish and he wept and said, “Love is madness. It requires of us no reason and offers none. It is the poison; it is the antidote. It is the martyrdom; it is the full reward. It kills and, by killing, restores to life. It gives fragrance to the blossom, sweetness to sugar, flavor to wine. Without it, the sun goes dark, flesh turns to dust, Joseph has no beauty and Solomon no wisdom.

“Here I come to the end of reason. I cannot apply my knowledge to understand it. It mocks and defies my understanding. There is no parable for this. Reason crumbles when love enters the heart.”

Before my eyes, the gibbet became a tree of white blossoms, and Iblis shone like the morning star, his beauty restored. If there is hope for him, there is hope enough for you and me.

# 1

# IN HEROD'S KEEP

i.

He does whatever He pleases and none may dispute Him. He chooses and none may question His choice. He blesses and curses whom He will and nothing may thwart His purpose. He prevails in His ends, though most men do not know. He decrees a thing "be" and it is. He is the Creator of Heaven and Hell and all that is between them. Not a breath is drawn without His explicit command.

In the religion of God, the unbelievers say, are fetters to bind men. But in the limits revealed by the Apostles of God there are myriad freedoms, and He permits even the freedom of unbelief.

When he was a child, Jesus, the son of Mary, was playing with the boys of his neighborhood. Several of them ventured onto a rooftop. Jesus told them to come down. The boys did not listen. One of the boys slipped from the roof, fell down and died. The other boys ran away. Jesus stayed beside the boy's body in the dust. The dead child's parents accused Jesus: "What have you done to our son?" Jesus did not answer, and the parents said, "You pushed him off the rooftop and killed him!" Jesus stood over the boy and said, "Who threw you down from the roof?" The dead child opened his mouth and said, "You did not throw me down; I slipped and fell, though you warned us to come down."

Jesus said, "I set the limits and those who abide in them live and those who disbelieve die. In the limits of the law I reveal nothing arbitrary, though to him it seemed so. And by establishing the limits, I did not punish him; he died of his own accord. How can you accuse me when I held out to him the hand of truth?

Call to mind the prophets Noah, and Salih, and Hud. They counseled the people but the people rejected them. They came as warners and helpers, but the people refused them and humiliated them. What will be said of the unbelievers except that they will understand the meaning of neither mercy nor wrath? They will bemoan His blessings and rejoice at His wrath against them.

Joseph and Pharaoh traveled along the Nile to survey Egypt. Three years of drought had parched the land, but Pharaoh's granaries were still overflowing because he had heeded Joseph's counsel. Now Pharaoh and Joseph came upon a farmer and his many sons. The farmer had yoked his youngest son to the plow and he and his older sons whipped him and mocked him as he plowed the dust.

Pharaoh stopped and spoke roughly to the father, saying, 'Why are you torturing this boy?'

The farmer fell on his face, groveled and said, 'Lord, he has offended me.'

Pharaoh said, 'What did he do?'

The man said, 'Lord, he is violent and disrespectful. He struck his mother's face until her eyes were swollen shut. And yesterday, my other sons offered me water while I worked in the field, but the boy struck the cup from my hand!'

Pharaoh turned to Joseph and said, 'Like afflicts like. The man is a brute and has raised a brutish son and punishes him for it.'

But Joseph, who saw into their hearts, said, 'The boy is innocent.'

Pharaoh said, 'But he beat his mother and attacked his father. Is his father lying?'

Joseph said, 'He is not lying, but his knowledge is still no more than ignorance. The boy's brothers poisoned their mother and, to save her from a sleep from which she would never awake, the boy struck her three times to wake her. His mother asked him, "Why did you strike me?" But the boy was silent; he concealed the wrongdoing of his brothers.

When his brothers put poison in their father's cup, the boy dashed it to the ground before it could touch his father's lips. His father asked him, "Why have you done this?" But the boy said nothing; he loved his brothers. At these assaults, his parents beat him. And having ruined his brothers' attempts on the lives of their parents, the boy was afflicted by them with vile tortures.'

Pharaoh unyoked the boy and took him from his father and his brothers. The father rejoiced to be rid of this unruly child. The brothers rejoiced that the boy could no longer stand between them and their inheritance.

Pharaoh appointed the farmer's son a minister of his government and gave him a wife from among his daughters. His father and mother meantime, were murdered by his brothers. And his brothers each turned one against the other and were crucified for their various crimes. When word of this came to the youth, he was distraught. But Joseph said to him, 'Consider how wayward they were. When you showed them true mercy, they reviled you and put you in chains. When you were taken from them and prevented any longer from interceding between themselves and their destruction, they considered this good fortune.'"

Whatever you possess, surrender. Whatever you desire, refuse. Whomever you love, renounce. When the believer bows down in the dust, he does not worship the dust.

His is the ultimate authority to command and no commands whatsoever but His are binding. Make no partners with God, for He is the Peerless, the Self-Abiding. And do not question Him or ask from Him an accounting of His doings to satisfy your inability to comprehend.

The disciples of Jesus went into the city to purchase food, for Jesus had said to them, "Are you hungry?"

When they returned, they offered him bread, but he turned it away with his hand, saying, "You know nothing of the food I eat."

The disciples said to each other, "Who has brought him food?" But none knew. They had not parted from one another's company all day. They said to him, "Lord, did you eat while we were away?"

Jesus said, "No. I have fasted all day."

The disciples said to themselves, "He contradicts himself. How will he teach us when he himself cannot tell truth from error?"

Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "You think I'm a hypocrite because you do not know that my appetite is different than yours. You hunger after things of the world. Remember this when I speak to you, so that you will see in my contradiction your condemnation."

Whatever they accuse Him of, the wages of their falsehood fall back on them, excepting those who repent. He is the Merciful, the Forgiving.

Do not seek beauty or friend or yet helper from any but Him. He is the Ancient Beauty, the Peerless Friend, the Only Helper.

When Jesus came to the Mount of Olives, he sent two disciples to the village to fetch for him the colt of an ass. This he commanded to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah. These disciples came upon a colt on which no man had ever sat and untied it. The owners demanded, "Why are you untying our colt? Would you be accused as thieves?" The disciples answered, "It is for the Lord, and no man's accusations are more terrible than to disobey him."

The disciples returned to Jesus with the colt. They laid their garments on its back and they set their Lord on the beast. And as Jesus approached Jerusalem, he was met by the multitudes who cheered him and reached out their hands to touch the hem of his garment, or even to stroke the colt on which he rode. The people called out to him, saying, "Bless us, Lord!" They cast their own garments and also branches of trees before the path of the Lord, to soften his approach and to honor him.

Jesus came to the Temple and alighted from the colt and turned away from the crowd. He told his disciples, "Return this colt to its owner."

But the people said, "Lord, give us this colt that it might be a remembrance of you, that we might honor it and give it comfort and peace all the days of its life. We would die rather than see any harm come to it."

Jesus said, "He is a beast fit for labor, not for praise. While I am with you, I am remembrance enough. Will you not honor me and

give me comfort and peace? In all the worlds only one has died with me, but you would all die for an ass.

Set your hearts on me, not on the colt that brought me. Though you may imagine you are remembering me when you invoke the colt, in truth you have forgotten me."

He is the Incomparable, the Self-Sufficing. Nothing whatsoever may thwart His purpose. He is All-Knowing, All-Seeing. There is nothing you conceal from Him, though the world may account you blameless. Such is their accounting!

A man, famous for his piety, was being praised by a people who had gathered to partake of his pious company. They extolled his greatness to his face for many hours, praising him ceaselessly. Yet the man did not respond to their flattery but looked troubled.

A friend tugged at his sleeve, "Such praise should please you. But you sit without speaking, as though these praises were curses."

The man replied, "Such praise saddens me. For every virtue I have paraded before men's eyes, I am reminded of two faults I have successfully concealed."

To whom will you turn but to the Lord for forgiveness? Remember the words of Iblis to the unbelievers when, on the Last Day, the tribes of men were called together before God. Iblis said, "God's promise to you was true, but I renounce my promises. And do not accuse me. I am blameless. Your crimes do not fall on me, nor am I guilty for your disbelief. I but called and you responded to my call. Blame only yourselves and seek no helper except God for He is the Most Merciful, the All-Forgiving."

When Noah was building his ark according to God's command, he asked, "Who among the people will survive His anger?"

The Angel of God said, "All who take refuge with you will survive."

But Noah doubted and said, "Will He spare my family?"

The Angel said, "He will spare you and your family and all those who believe. He is Merciful, Forgiving."

After Noah heard this, he was relieved for the sake of his wife, Emzara, whom he loved more than his own life, and for his four sons. But when the flood came, Noah's favorite son would not board the ark.

Noah said to him, "Come aboard with me and be saved."

But the son said, "I will climb to the top of the mountain where I will be safe from the flood."

Noah said, "There is no shelter but with Him. Why do you seek another shelter?"

A great wave rose up between the father and his son and separated them. The waters swept the son away to his death.

Noah mourned and remembered God's promise. The Angel of God said to him, "Why do you doubt His promise to you?"

Noah said, "I saw my son drown before my eyes. Surely His promise is true, but I saw him die."

The Angel said to him, "He did not spare you so that you might be counted among the ignorant. Do not ask this question. *Do not take this road. It is not yours to take.*"

Noah answered, "I would rather die on this road than be, for an instant, among those who doubt."

The Angel said to Noah, "Though he was the child you raised from infancy, he was not your son who died."

Noah said, "If the boy who called me father was another than my favorite son, who was he?"

The Angel said, "He was the son of your wife by another man."

When Noah heard this, his heart dissolved in a sea of absinthe and he said, "Lord, this is a fitting punishment for those who have disbelieved. I trusted her and doubted You, yet You delivered me and she betrayed me."

Do not ask Him of His doings lest He reveal your own. Pursue no cause but His cause. His is the greatest good, the ultimate end. And do not seek shelter except in Him. In no other is there a moment's peace.

Do not choose the world over Him Who made the world. Who would praise the pot without remembering the potter?

A wealthy widow had two suitors. The first was a poor man, formerly her husband's slave but freed at the husband's death. He was virtuous but had neither good looks nor education. Though he loved the widow completely, in the awe of her presence he was scarcely intelligible and was incapable of expressing the poetry of his heart. Yet in the pitch of his speech, she discerned the diamond of love.

The second suitor was a scoundrel who had been unfaithful to his previous wife. His indiscretions had cost him home, family, and wealth. Therefore, he went to the wealthy widow and professed love for her.

For many hours, though he freely admitted his faults and errors, he protested his true love for her, repeating again and again that he loved her and loved no other but her in words so sublime that the bird of her heart fluttered in the cage of her breast. But she was not deceived; she saw in the means of his love the ends of her property. And when he finished speaking, she said to him: "Words of love are sweet, but grow sickening in excess. A single word of sincere love, however crudely delivered, is more delightful. A thousand false words, however sweetly wrapped, taste bitter on my tongue. I could never prefer the eloquence of Pharaoh over the truth of a stuttering Moses."

*I have said much that was false and much that was true.* May God forgive me the error of the first and the presumption of the second. And may He overlook my trespasses against Him, though He is immeasurably exalted over my ability to help or harm Him.

ii.

When John the Baptist was arrested by Herod's soldiers, his disciples did nothing. He had grown strange to them, though the people still esteemed him. Before his arrest, John had abandoned the wilderness of Judea and no longer preached to the people. A

few of his disciples had left to follow Jesus, as he commanded. The others remained with him. He said to them, “What word will I say to you but that you have not heard a better word before it?”

They said to him, “Master, the people are in error and need your guidance.”

John said, “Why do you call me master? I called on you to recognize the Lord, but when He came, did you follow Him as I commanded you? Or do you linger with me, a corpse in your midst?”

Not understanding him, his disciples said, “Master, when have we ever disobeyed?”

John said, “You have stayed with me. You have loitered in desert and desolation when the Master of the house welcomed you to His garden. Seek Him out, and if you find Him, ask His forgiveness.”

Yet the disciples of John continued to call upon the people to prepare for the coming of their Lord. But John said to them, “That you invoke Him while not recognizing Him, you err even as the people you chastise.”

His disciples answered, “Master, how can you say this? We merely repeat what you preached in the wilderness. How have we erred?”

But John would not answer them and this they accounted a mystery beyond their reckoning.

Now during this time, Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, took Herodias as his wife, though she had been the wife of his brother. On the day of their marriage, Herod commanded in a solemn decree that the people were to rejoice and be festive. Thus, amid cheering and in great pomp and ostentation, Herod and his sister celebrated their marriage feast. The disciples of John, however, went to the people, telling them, “Take no part in their celebrations. Do not cheer or rejoice except that the Lord will come.”

When Herodias overheard the warnings of John’s disciples, she was furious. She said to Herod, “How can you let him live who

contends with you for the love of the people? The madman they call John tramples on the majesty of your station and commands the homage they owe you. Put him to death and the Pharisees will honor you and the people will forget their false Elijah as they forgot the Elijah before him and those who will come after."

But Herod said, "How can I lay a hand on him whom the people adore? You will never make his blood palatable to me. If John's disciples disapprove of our marriage, let them frown and shake their heads. No harm needs befall us, unless we call it down on ourselves. Let his disciples wag their tongues. Smile on them. Their disapproval buzzes but has no sting. Yet, if I kill John, they will make a cause of his intolerance."

Herodias said, "If you will not kill John for my sake, then take him prisoner for yours. Treat him as a slave or as a prince, so long as you lock him away from sight. Then his disciples will fear us for our power over him and will say nothing to offend us while we have him in our keeping. Do not refuse me."

When Herod's soldiers arrested John, his disciples dispersed and the people did nothing, though some considered John a prophet like the prophets of old, and others considered him the return of Elijah, while yet others hailed him as the messiah, though John denied all these claims. Nevertheless, Herod treated his prisoner with respect, guarding him from harm, for he knew that Herodias sought his blood to oil the sword of her pride.

When John spoke, which he did seldom and but softly, something of the nature of his voice disturbed Herod. And John's words perplexed Herod, but he took strange comfort in them. Still he did not believe. Herod did not worship the God of the Jews, but admired the deities of Rome. Yet even these he expiated half-willingly. The cup of his heart was drained of the wine of belief.

One day Herod found John quietly at his prayers, crying into his beard. Herod laughed, "Poor prophet. Where is your pride and righteous anger now? Who listens raptly now? No one but this wretched king in his wretched keep. When Elijah's term ended

god fetched him up into paradise in a fiery chariot. Where is your chariot, John? Will you be lifted into Heaven alive? Or will you die a shameful death in my prison? Your former students have abandoned their master. You are alone. No disciple will defend you. None have sought you out. Not one. All those boys so eager for your talk—what did they offer in return? Their worship? Or was it something meaner and more human? The warmth of their companionship? Their young flesh? Their smooth skin? The youngest are like women, John. Have you partaken of that fruit? Did your guilt lay you so low? Did such a crime cause your god to abandon you to my mercies?"

John said, "I have no such desires."

"Don't be embarrassed, John. You are right to be angry. You told them to follow the one you announced…another Joshua doing battle for god's land and god's people. I suppose I play the part of the Canaanites. But that rabble-rouser is no prophet and the priests will finish him. The people who adore him are fickle. You know that better than anyone. They care only for the trend of him. He is fashionable. He intrigues me just as he intrigued you in the wilderness. Maybe you wonder now if his charm deceived you. Oh, poor prophet in a winding-sheet of doubt; was he the one? Did you measure him properly?"

John said, "It was Him."

"It means nothing. The people will cast him off and go looking for a new messiah to save them from Rome and from me. But their search for a revolutionary savior will destroy us all. These are not the Greeks and we are not the Maccabees."

John said, "I have no interest in your politics."

Herod said, "Oh, but you should. If you are not moved by flesh or politics, what else then? Faith? God abandoned you to me, to my keep. He delivered your life into my hands."

John said, "That I am in a prison is nothing. It is a sign of neither approval nor rejection. Wasn't Jeremiah in a king's prison? Even Joseph was in the well for a time."

Herod said, "Please stop before you compare yourself to Job as well. I am no prophet like you, but if I recall both Jeremiah and Joseph had not yet accomplished what they were sent to accomplish. Yes, even Jonah's mission was ahead of him while he lingered in a fish. But yours is done and here you are. Your work for him is done and he has abandoned you.

We are brothers. We are sons of the same nation under the protection of the same god. We have both served it and him in our own capacities. I have given up on him, however, and see nowhere any evidence of the power you allege he possesses. Don't tell me you still worship him. I could put your head on a pike and he would do nothing to stop me. I could have the Romans crucify you, and he would make no noise…not even a still, small voice. The Romans could torch the city and put hundreds of thousands of innocents to the sword; he would do nothing even as some centurion peered behind the curtain, into the holy of holies. He will not come. The Greeks came and seduced us; but we rejected them only to be raped by the Romans. Where is our god, my brother? He is silent! He is either too weak or too cruel to intervene! Or perhaps he does not even exist. What a horror for you and for our people. I tell you, this search for a messiah will ruin us. It is our nation's folly. When they have given up and settled down, then our people might be peaceful. But I expect Jerusalem will burn before that day comes.

So they look for their messiah to save them from Rome. Well here I am. I've kept the peace and some autonomy. I've gone to Rome and groveled before their gods and senators. But the people think I've sold them out. It is not enough for them to keep the Romans at bay. They genuinely expect a messiah to come and destroy their empire. For a while they looked to you to provide them this god among men. And you gave them—how hilarious this is—the bastard son of a whore. Let's see this Joshua do better than I have done with Rome. The people will demand that he lead them in armed rebellion. The priests will throw him to the Roman

dogs. And when the Romans have executed him, our people will find another and yet another to lead them against Rome. And when Rome tires of our folly, they will burn Jerusalem and send us into exile. Since I don't need a Jeremiah to tell me this story, I can only imagine that you're here only because god is done with you!

We are brothers, John. I served the nation god created. You served the god who created the nation. And we are both fools for it. I see no reason and no good end. Even Solomon admitted it. Is it nothing more than this? This chasing after wind? And worse, I find it is godless. If I had even a dram of belief and understanding, I think I might be at ease.

John, my brother, show me the world you see. I have no faith in god, and have lost faith in our people. I do not have the latter, give me a taste of the former."

John said, "I cannot give you what you ask. Belief is God's to offer and His to deny. But if you turn to Him then you will perceive the inner meaning of the story of the golden arrows.

A youth named Zahir was trespassing on land owned by King Ahasuerus. While the king and his retinue were in the wilderness hunting, Zahir came upon the king's tent, unguarded and unoccupied. Inside, he found a quiver of nine golden arrows. He thought to steal this treasure and placed the arrows under his shirt. But before he had hidden the final arrow, the king and his party returned from the hunt and the king's guards discovered Zahir and took him by his arms. Ahasuerus saw his quiver of arrows, but found only one remaining where earlier there had been nine.

King Ahasuerus asked the boy, 'Are you a thief, even in the presence of your king?'

Zahir feigned ignorance of the accusation and said, 'My Lord, I came upon your tent and curiosity drew me in, but I am innocent.'

The king took the single golden arrow in his hand and said, 'Do you not hear this one weeping for its missing brothers?' And

Ahasuerus drew his bow and fired his arrow, saying, 'How can I refuse it reunion?'

The arrow pierced Zahir's flesh between two ribs. When he received this wound Zahir fainted and the eight stolen arrows fell from his shirt.

Now the king carried Zahir to his palace and the king's own surgeons attended the boy and removed the shaft of the arrow and stitched the wound closed. But the golden arrowhead remained lodged in Zahir's flesh, for the king had told his surgeons to leave it.

When Zahir awoke he remembered nothing, but escaped his doctors and hurried to the village of his home.

Discovering his wound while bathing him, Zahir's mother asked her son, 'How did you receive this injury?'

Zahir said, 'I am not hurt.'

Zahir's mother said, 'Who has stitched this wound together?'

Zahir had no recollection of the king or his surgeons, knew nothing of his wound or of the arrow still lodged between his ribs.

As Zahir grew older, a pain in his ribs grew worse every year. And in his old age, the agony became unbearable. He went to doctors who examined him but could find no sign of injury.

'This is a mystery to us,' the doctors declared. They prescribed worthless medicines to combat the pain that he endured day and night.

At last, Zahir found a surgeon who would treat him. The surgeon opened up Zahir's flesh and was amazed to find the golden arrow. But as he withdrew the object from Zahir's body, the old man died, never gazing for a moment on the true source of his sorrows."

John said, "That your disbelief pains you and that you suffer for it and long to be released from it is sufficient proof. Separation from God has scorched you and you look upon your burned body and ask for proof of the fire.

The faithless man is lost in the desert. Thirst and heat unhinge his mind. He sees nothing but desert, imagines nothing beyond desert, though in truth his very subsistence depends on that which he does not see and which he cannot conceive. 'There is only desert,' he says, even as he seeks out the sweet fruit of trees from beyond the desert and drinks water from mountains whose peaks he will never glimpse.

And among the teachers and philosophers are those who deny God and who are proud of their knowledge. But their knowledge is like a spider's web and their pride is the pride of flycatchers. Their webs, however great, cannot catch a lion. And it does no credit to their knowledge that they believe, because they have never caught a lion in their webs, that lions do not exist.

Men are wholly blind, yet insist that they perceive the world through their own eyes. They stumble and tremble, taking in their hands all manner of objects to determine the truth of them, for they see nothing. Yet by judging the world according to their feeble standards, they are led into the error of disbelief and into the wilds of perdition.

A blind man was offered a drink of the sweetest wine. He drank it and smiled, appreciating its savor. But when offered a second draught, the blind man said, 'Let me feel the bottle from which you have poured this bounty, that I may know whether it is sweet or sour.'

Such are the minds of men who demand proof of God's bounty. His bounty alone is His proof, and no other proof can suffice you.

The Sun one day spoke thus to himself, 'All the worlds cry out, "Why glow so brightly if none can look at you even for a moment?" I glow for my love of mankind. Every day I look down upon the wide blue earth, upon the seas on which I dance, upon the mountains that stretch vainly to reach me, and I see men pray and sacrifice to me. They know I am their provider. They see me and know that warmth and light and life come from me.

What man living in the world could be without knowledge of me? Who could deny me in the face of these binding and conclusive proofs?'

Musing on this, the Sun undertook to examine all mankind in search of one who disbelieved in him. To his surprise, he found such a man immediately, an old man who lived alone in a cave by the sea. He grew corn and squash to eat and he drew water from a nearby stream and lived his life in isolation from other men. This old man was entirely blind, unable even to perceive shades of light and shadow; his eyes were ruined from birth.

While the old man was tending his little garden, he heard a voice calling out to him.

The voice said, 'I am the Sun, suspended in the heavens above. Look upon me and know me, for I am the giver of all life. All the things on earth I have provided for your sustenance and pleasure. I have given you life also; you owe me belief at least for that.'

The old man replied, 'Sun? I have heard this word before, stranger, but have never comprehended the meaning. People speak to me as though the existence of this sun were miraculously evident in itself. Well, it is not evident to me. And if you, who speak for this sun, claim to be the giver of my life and the provider of all things on earth, then I have to respond that I lack any evidence to believe you. Describe your nature to me that I may understand you, if indeed there is such a thing as the sun and you are him.'

The Sun said, 'I should not be put to proof by you, you who are but an insect to me. In any event, I cannot describe myself to you who have never seen with eyes. How would you understand? My words would be meaningless. At least, however, you are capable of feeling my heat, for my fire warms the world. When I am absent, how much colder life becomes.'

The old man said, 'I have known both heat and cold.'

'Then you must know that I am the source of heat.'

'Hardly,' the old man replied. 'I feel heat; but I do not pretend to

know the source of it. Perhaps the air produces heat. Perhaps the ground sometimes does, for the sand feels hot to me.'

The Sun said, 'No, I produce it. The tongues of my fire warm you. The rays of my heat touch you, your face, your hands, the ground and the sky. I embrace the world with the essence of me.'

The old man responded, 'Then present yourself to me that I may touch your face. Then I will know and believe.'

'I am exalted well above your ability to touch me.'

The old man shouted, 'Ah, you contradict yourself, you liar! If I cannot touch your face, then how do you presume to touch me and, indeed, embrace the world?'

The Sun did not answer this, but chose another argument. 'Tell me, how do you account for the corn and squash growing in your garden? You must know that they have a source and that they derive from me the ability to grow and prosper for your benefit.'

The old man was adamant in his rejection of the Sun's claims. 'I know nothing of the sort. I know that they grow from seeds I carefully plant and by virtue of watering. Water is all they require and, perhaps, heat to warm them.'

The Sun said, 'Yes, but what is the source of this heat?'

'I have told you, the ground or the sky perhaps. I do not pretend to know exactly. But I suspect it is not the product of some inscrutable celestial orb. Perhaps these things are derived by accident. Perhaps their existence is fortuitous and arbitrary.'

Hearing this, the Sun grew angry and berated the man. But the old man would listen no more. Although he was convinced that no sun even existed, he finally spoke to the Sun, saying, 'Assuming that there is a sun that invisibly performs all these miracles, why should I believe that you are him?'

Exasperated, the Sun finally answered, 'Go then and deny me all the rest of your days. I am exalted well above either your belief or disbelief.'"

Herod said, "But I do not feel his presence nor do I hear his voice."

John said, "If your hands are soiled with dirt and your master approaches, do you grasp his skirt, or do you first wipe your hands against your own?

An old woman was slowly going blind but, in her vanity, she stubbornly refused to admit it. Every day in the marketplace, she would invariably stumble in the paths of others. But rather than asking their pardon, she accused them of blindness. When she complained of this to her family, her daughter replied, 'Which is it, mother? Is all the world losing its sight, while you retain yours? Or is their vision fine and yours at fault?'

One evening, the old woman called for her son to bring her a fresh lantern, for the one by which she was reading was too dim in her eyes. The son did as his mother told him and brought a second lantern. His mother scolded him, saying, 'The light of that lantern is also too weak! Fetch me a lantern with a brighter flame.' The son said, 'Mother, were I to bring you the very sun in my arms, you would account it insufficient. Do not berate the flame for your incapacity to profit by it. The lantern is not dim, rather it is your vision!'"

iii.

Herod considered what John had said to him and, for a number of days, sought to refute him. He said to John, "If I accept your arguments for the existence of god, then I am prepared to judge him according to his deserts. You call him all-powerful and all-good and nothing can withstand him. Yet if he is all-powerful, then the misery that is in this world is partly his responsibility and he cannot therefore be all-good. And if he is all-good then he cannot be all-powerful, for he suffers evil to exist in the world. Therefore, your god is either capricious and cruel or he is a weakling."

John replied, "There is evil in the world. But even this is a sign of God. Turn away from the sun and the world becomes dark. He permits evil to persist so that we may know ourselves and, on the

day we are brought before Him, we will bear ourselves witness and nowhere will we have to turn except to Him.

A blacksmith was working one day on a stubborn piece of metal. The metal refused to yield, and it cried out to the blacksmith, 'Why are you torturing me?' It despaired, 'Why do you burn me? Why do you stretch me out naked on your anvil and strike me with your hammer?'

The blacksmith did not answer the pleading one before him, but continued as before.

The metal wailed unceasingly, between pleas and curses, calling out, 'I cannot bear it! Destroy me!'

Again the blacksmith did not answer, but continued his work until the metal at last began to yield, as it always did, and its shape became appropriate to the end for which he forged it.

After the blows ended, the blacksmith, with loving care, sharpened the shining blade. He fitted its handle with jewels and rubies of exquisite carving. The scimitar beheld itself and found itself beautiful beyond compare.

The scimitar declared, 'I should never have cursed you, and for cursing you I deserved to be cast into the fire and never withdrawn. Yet you made of me, who was once a lump of useless ore, a sword of abiding beauty. I should have blessed you; I did not understand. Why didn't you tell me the end to which you worked me? Why didn't you explain the reason for which you refused to hold back these agonies?'

The blacksmith answered, 'Had I reasoned with you, you would never have comprehended. Your little mind understood only unceasing pain. You could not know that my tyranny was in fact my bounty, and that my cruelty was in truth mercy. Blandishments would have caused you to resist me more, therefore I offered none. Rare is the occasion when, from the ore, a sword is ready-made. You were insensible metal; now you are the companion of the king. Go in peace, blessing when once you cursed, knowing when once you were ignorant.'"

Herod said, "You may consider him all-good this way, but you cannot deny that innocent men suffer in abject misery—and all this to no good end!"

John answered, "Even in Hell are the signs of the Lord.

When the brothers of Joseph, on account of their pettiness and envy, sold Joseph into slavery to be rid of him, they sought to conceal their crime. Therefore, they took Joseph's robe, which their father had given him as a token of his love for the boy, and spattered it with goat's blood. They brought this back with them from Dothan, where they had forsaken Joseph while pasturing their father's flock. They carried it to their father's tent, as a testimony to the lie they told their father, Jacob.

'Father,' they cried, 'we have returned with this remnant of Joseph. While we went racing one another and left Joseph to care for our things in our absence, a wolf came upon him and devoured him.' And in the tent of their father, three of the brothers, Judah, Reuben and Simeon, presented their brother's robe to Jacob. And when Jacob saw the robe of his favorite son, which was dirty and soaked in blood, he took it in his arms and wept.

Jacob mourned the loss of his son, and none of his family, neither his wives, nor his daughters, nor yet his sons could console him. The only comfort he took was in Joseph's blood-spattered robe. Reuben, pained at the sight of his father's sufferings, said to him, 'Father, let me take that robe from you, the robe which you gave to him, and I will bury it or burn it.'

Jacob said, 'No, I will keep it to remember him.'

Reuben said, 'But father, it reeks with filth and blood. It is unclean.'

Jacob agreed, saying, 'This is true, but still I scent the sweet fragrance of Joseph on it.'"

John said, "They pretended him dead, but they did not perceive. They fell into despair, not knowing the end to which all things, even despair, are wrought.

The brothers of Joseph returned from Egypt with grain, but were dejected. When their father, Jacob, met them, he said to them, 'Why are your faces downcast?'

Levi said, 'Father, the Egyptian lord who sold us this grain accused us as spies and took your son Simeon and locked him up. The lord asked after you and after Benjamin, saying, "Come back with Benjamin that I may see his face and know you are not liars and spies. If you do this, I will release Simeon."'

Jacob rent his shirt. He said, 'I will not let you take Benjamin to this Egyptian lord. Already I have lost Rachel's first son. Would you have me risk the life of her second? Where else will I find another remembrance of Joseph in the faces of my sons but in Benjamin, Joseph's only brother? This Egyptian lord will take Benjamin from me. Already he has stolen Simeon away. I have lost two sons to your keeping. I will not risk more.'

Tears rolled over Jacob's face and he wept over the loss of Simeon, counting him already among the dead. But Jacob took comfort in Benjamin, Joseph's brother, and said to him, 'I cannot bear to lose you, for to lose you is death to me. When I lost Joseph I went down into Sheol that very day.'

Now the months passed, and the drought did not end. Jacob said to his sons, 'Be of some use. Go to Egypt and purchase more grain before we die.'

But his sons said, 'Father, remember the Egyptian lord. We must take Benjamin with us, or that lord will surely know us and cast us all into prison with Simeon. We will be no use to you then. Let us take Benjamin and we will return with grain.'

Jacob said, 'How can I trust you a third time with that which you have lost twice before? Were I to do this, you would be right in thinking me mad. But if you do not go, we will starve, and I will lose Benjamin. And if you go, but without Benjamin, you will be imprisoned and we will starve and I will lose Benjamin. Indeed, I am already in Sheol, bereft of Joseph and of Simeon, of Benjamin and of all my sons. I have lost everything, all my possessions,

my wives and my grandchildren. Take Benjamin with you. And do not think that by losing him you will gain a father, as you thought when you took Joseph from me. No father am I, no son, no brother. But I place my whole trust in God, knowing that even in the dust I will find Him. And if I have loved any one of you, it is because I have seen in you the signs of God. I seek no other friend than Him, but find Him always in my company.'

Do not grieve in humiliation, for the blessings of the Lord are soon upon you. And do not rejoice in affluence, for He curses whom He will. But even this serves His purpose, though you do not know. And the tears of Jacob were rewarded and the crimes of Joseph's brothers were repaid.

When Jacob died, the brothers of Joseph wrung their hands and spoke balefully to one another: 'Joseph will hate us now, remembering the wrong we did him. He has spared us only for our father's sake.' They invented a story to trick Joseph. Fearing to go before Joseph, they sent a message to him, saying, 'Before Jacob died, he called us before him and, in your absence, he enjoined upon you forgiveness of us. He said, "When I am gone, beg Joseph forgiveness for the wrong you did him. Pray that he deliver you from punishment for the evil you committed against him. Do this and surely he will forgive you." Therefore, we pray you spare us, for we are your servants.'

When Joseph read these words, he wept and called on his brothers to come to him in Pharaoh's household. And when they came, they fell on their faces before him, pleading with him, 'Spare us, brother; we are your servants.'

Joseph said, 'When you cast me into the pit, I did not curse you or revile you. And though you conspired maliciously against me, God meant it for good and nothing whatsoever can thwart His purpose. And when I was raised up to rule over the land, Pharaoh said to me, "Will you seek out your brothers who wronged you and your father? Will you hunt them down and impale them?" But I told him I would not. And when you came to purchase

grain from me, not knowing me, Pharaoh said to me, “Will you hang them on the gallows and crucify them? It is well within your power to destroy them.” But I said to him I would not.’

The brothers of Joseph said, ‘We fear that you have let us live for love of our father.’

Joseph said, ‘Had I laid hold of you all and crucified you and returned alone with Benjamin to our father, he would have declared, “This is manifest justice.”’

Now when the brothers of Joseph heard this, they realized their message had been for nothing and they feared him whom they wronged. They said to themselves, ‘Nothing will keep him from killing us.’

Joseph said, ‘The message you sent to me, you purposed to deceive me. Did you think me unaware? I was also there the very moment our father drew up his knees and took his last breath.

Nothing that you do is hidden from me. But in what you have done is a mystery you do not perceive. Pharaoh asked if I would requite evil with wrath. And indeed, your wrong against me was requited, but not with my wrath, if you but knew.

You thought you threw me down the well, but you did not know. You cast yourselves into that pit. When I was sold into slavery, you yourselves became bondsmen to the deed. Even then you did not know it and you returned home to our father. But did you gloat? Or did you weep for what you had done? Did you laugh while our father mourned? Or did you mourn with him, doubly grieved by your bad consciences? I knew and did not disturb your ignorance and when you came to me, I hid from you, to discern your secret hearts.

And when you brought Benjamin to me, only then did I reveal myself to you. Not one of you said, “You should have shown yourself sooner to ease our consciences.” No, I let you linger in your guilt and ignorance that you might discover virtue and knowledge. Therefore, when I revealed myself to you, at that moment you wept and begged me to forgive you, and I forgave

you. There is no more punishment for you, except that you know how you dealt with me when you thought you had power over me. Now you know; the wrong you wrought against me was in truth a wrong against your very selves.'

After Joseph had said this, his brothers wept and embraced him. Joseph said, 'Do not be afraid of me. Think no more about the evil you did me, for in your evil there were a hundred goods. Not a mote of your malice fell on me. Indeed, through your jealousy, God caused me to be raised up to power over you and, through your perfidy, God brought about your salvation. Your evil did not fall on me, but only on yourselves. So do not fear me. I will look after you and your little ones. The fire of my anger will never burn you, except that the light of my mercy shines within.'"

Herod said, "But not all men suffer. If wealthy men know nothing of suffering and if year by year their wealth grows more rapidly than they can squander it, are these men blessed by your god?"

John said, "The Lord tests men according to their capacity. And some men he tests with affluence.

A dervish was living in seclusion in the mountains. He had turned his back on the face of the world, and had barred the doors of his heart against the whim of desire. His austerities and vows had made his name synonymous with piety. The people who lived in nearby villages esteemed him and considered him a holy man and climbed sometimes to his retreat to offer a little food in exchange for a wealth of wisdom.

One day the nizam, who found himself in difficulty with a rebel warlord, went to the dervish, offered him bread and asked from him his blessing against his opponents, which the dervish freely gave. And when the nizam met his foe in battle, he vanquished him utterly and his power and prestige were not merely restored, but much enhanced. Delighted by this turn of fortune, the nizam bestowed on the dervish unnumbered treasures of gold and jewels, a palace in the capital, and a hundred servants. To the villagers'

surprise, the dervish left his seclusion in the mountains. He moved to the palace and accepted the generous pension offered by the nizam, all for the price of a single benediction.

The dervish put away his tattered robes, exchanging them for muslin and silk and golden threads. He abandoned the lifelong austerities to which he had bound himself by various oaths. He gathered a harem of great beauties for himself and imported only the most expensive and exotic delicacies for his dinners. The dervish became haughty where before he was humble, and ill-tempered where before he was tolerant. His servants considered him a tyrant, and the women of his harem thought him a beast.

When the wife of the nizam heard of the change that had overcome the character of the famous dervish, she scolded her husband.

The nizam replied, saying, 'I did nothing to change this man's nature.'

His wife said, 'You have corrupted him with wealth!'

The nizam answered, 'You consider his corruption to be a change of character. But his character is no different than on the day I found him sitting in his cave. Wealth has not altered his nature; it has only altered his circumstances. Affluence does not change a man, it merely reveals him.'"

Herod said, "If your god is all-knowing, why does he need to test his creatures? If he must test them, then he cannot be all-knowing. If he knows their hearts, then by testing them he is merely cruel."

John said, "In truth, God knows all and sees within us faults we hide even from ourselves. He reveals to us our true selves for our own sake.

Haman, owing to his hatred of Mordecai, wished to destroy the Jews. He said to King Ahasuerus, 'There are a people among us who are wicked and whose ways are foreign. They refuse to bow down before the idols, but only to their foreign god. Condemn these people, and I will pay a fortune into your treasuries.'

Ahasuerus said, 'Keep your money and spend it as you choose. Give me the decree in judgment against the Jews and I will seal it with my signet.'

The decree was written commanding that the Jews of Ahasuerus' kingdom be slain and their properties confiscated. And the king read and understood the decree and sealed it with the imprint of his ring, commanding it be disseminated throughout his kingdom.

Haman was overjoyed and spent the money with which he had attempted to bribe his king on the construction of gallows for the execution of the Jews in the city, Mordecai chief among them.

When Ahasuerus' wife, Esther, heard of the decree from Mordecai, her heart's bloom withered and she wept. She was Jewish, though she had kept this knowledge from the king, her husband. 'Haman has ensnared the king and is determined that my people should die. How will I live, then? If I reveal my faith, I will die with them. If I conceal it, I am doubly dead.'

Mordecai sent a message to her, telling her to go to Ahasuerus and plead with him for the lives of their people. Esther hesitated, saying, 'The king is in his inner court and only those who are commanded by him to enter are allowed in his presence. Any who are not called but who enter his inner court are swiftly and surely put to death, unless the king holds out his scepter.'

But Esther relented and said, 'I will go, though it is against the law. And if he is displeased with me, I will certainly die.'

She dressed in her royal robes and went into the inner court where Ahasuerus reigned. Ahasuerus saw her and detected in her features fear and sadness. He pitied her and, because he loved her, he held out his scepter that she might live.

Ahasuerus spoke gently to her, 'Why have you come to me in my inner court? Why would you come to me here, knowing that I have not called for you?'

Esther trembled in the presence of her husband, and said to him, 'I have not come on my own account, but to ask something of you.'

Ahasuerus held out his hand and took Esther's arm, drawing her nearer. He said, 'Ask me whatever you will and I will grant it.'

But Esther said, 'If it pleases you, I have prepared a dinner for you. Bring Haman with you and then I will make my request.'

Ahasuerus agreed to this and invited Haman to eat with him at his wife's table. While the king reclined and drank the wine Esther had poured him, he said, 'Tell me your request. I will grant you anything you ask, even to the half of my kingdom.'

But Esther said, 'If it pleases you, come tomorrow with Haman and dine with me again, and then I will make my request.'

Ahasuerus relented, and said, 'As you wish.'

On the second day, again as Ahasuerus drank his wine, he asked, 'What would you ask of me, knowing that whatever you ask I will fulfill it for you?'

'If it pleases you, annul your decree against the Jews, for I am Jewish. If you condemn them, then I must also die.'

When Haman heard these words he was astounded, and feared for his life. The king said, 'I will revoke the decree that I sealed with my ring, but you must tell me who desired the death of the Jews.'

Esther pointed to Haman, saying, 'He is to blame for this decree. He deceived you.'

Ahasuerus became angry and, to regain his composure, left the queen's table and stepped out into the garden.

Haman pleaded with Esther that her intervention might spare his life. Pitifully he clutched at her robes and cried out, 'God forbid! I did bring the decree to the king for his judgment, but it was the king who permitted it. No power do I have whatsoever except at the pleasure of the king!'

Ahasuerus returned. He saw Haman clinging to Esther and said, 'Would you even assault my wife in my own house? Hang him on his gallows!' And when the king said this, his guards dragged Haman away.

Esther said, 'Will you rescind the decree with which Haman tricked you?'

The king answered, 'I will issue a second decree annulling the first. But do not say that Haman tricked me, for I am beyond any man's power to deceive. It was I who deceived Haman by turning away his bribe with which he has built the gallows on which he hangs, and by sealing the decree against the Jews, through which Haman revealed himself to be the enemy of my beloved wife, and therefore my enemy. Think awhile on Ahmad's words: *Did those in whose heart is sickness think that God would not bring to light their rancor?* At no point was I misled, for I heard Mordecai's lamentations at my gate and understood the reason for your fear in my inner court.'

Esther did not understand, and said, 'If you knew these things, then why did you permit the first decree against my people?'

To answer this, Ahasuerus told Esther a story: 'A company of jackals came upon a lion who had killed a gazelle and who sat serenely before his victim. Because these jackals knew they were no match for a lion, they kept a respectful distance. They waited and watched, expecting the lion to sate his appetite on the flesh of the gazelle and to leave the carcass behind. But the lion did not devour his kill, but sat unmoving before it like a golden sentinel.

The jackals complained to him, "If you will not eat, then leave!"

The lion did not respond, but looked unblinkingly at them.

Again the jackals cried out, "Why do you loiter over that carcass? Move aside that we may have our share!"

The lion said, "How can you claim any part of what is mine? Had you expended every effort to take possession of it, you would have never acquired it. When it lived, you knew such a thing was unattainable to you. Now you gaze at its corpse and lust after its cold blood and consider yourselves part-owners of my dominion."

One jackal decided to test the lion. He snatched a piece of the gazelle's flesh, swallowing it whole and returning unharmed to his comrades. The lion did not move and did not say a word.

The jackal declared to his comrades, "He is no lion! He is a statue! Like stone he sits and stares and does not move. See how I stole from him?"

The other jackals said, "It was luck! How can he be a statue? Do statues speak? It is your good fortune that he did not kill you."

But the jackal was undaunted and, rushing forward again, stole another morsel from the carcass, and met no opposition from the lion. The lion neither moved nor spoke.

At this sign, the other jackals were persuaded and fell hungrily on the flesh of the gazelle, paying no attention to the lion in their midst. But as they ate their fill, the lion bounded up and fell upon the jackals before him, slaughtering them all and chastising them, declaring, "It was not luck that permitted you to steal from me. I allowed it to find the thieves among you."'

When Ahasuerus was done with this story, he said, 'I need not bring destruction on the people, even on those who do evil in my kingdom, for they readily bring destruction on themselves. This is what Muhammad, peace be upon him, meant when he revealed to the believers: *If God had willed, He would have avenged Himself upon them, but that He may try some of you by means of others.* I quicken men in their paths, whether toward good or evil. Without my intervention men would not know their true selves.'"

iv.

When John had finished speaking, Herod said to him, "All you have said may be true, but why does it matter to him that I worship him? You call him the self-sufficing. How does my worship profit him? You say he is exalted well above my belief or disbelief. How does my denial harm him? If my disbelief weakens him, he cannot be all-powerful. If it has no effect on him, what purpose do your admonitions serve? How can it matter to this god of yours whether I take Herodias as my wife? Or whether I put you to death?"

John answered, "He needs nothing from you; there is nothing you presume to possess that He did not grant you and that He cannot take from you. He is the Giver. If He takes, He takes only what was given. Though He is self-sufficing, nothing suffices but Him. And if you set your affection on this world of dust, then you are lost and everything you love will be taken from you.

A certain woman was married to a cruel man who beat her and her children incessantly. His lips shed no word of kindness that wasn't followed by a hundred insults. His hand offered no gentle touch that wasn't preceded by a thousand blows. When he died his children rejoiced at their deliverance from his daily abuses and his tyranny, but his wife wept and moaned after him. Her mourning did not end but grew more pathetic each day. She moved out of her house and went to live in the mausoleum in which her dead husband was entombed. By his corpse she lay each night, wrapping his dead arms about her and imagining his putrid stench to be sweet perfume.

Her children believed their mother mad and they summonded a doctor in hope that he might recognize the malady and cure her. When the doctor found her beside her dead husband, wrapped in his rigid embrace, he was sickened and he turned away.

Her children asked after their mother; the doctor replied, 'The mausoleum is her fitting home. She is more dead than her husband.'"

John said, "The flame of desire cannot be put out with the oil of indulgence. The fire, a moment quenched, burns hotter for it and demands a greater portion. Do not feed your passions, or they will feed on you.

A fox and a jackal were friends and hunting companions. Whatever they captured, whether by the jackal's strength or the fox's wits, the jackal divided. He always divided the greater portion to himself, leaving only a few morsels for the fox. Over time the jackal grew fat while the fox remained thin. Yet while the jackal's appetite never abated, the fox accepted the meager

allotment which fell to him, for he considered his contentment the essence of wisdom.

One day, the fox and the jackal came upon a lion who had eyes for their flesh. The fox vanished into the bush. The jackal, however, who had grown fat in his companionship with the fox, fell easy prey to the lion. Mocking him, the lion said, ‘Look at yourself, fat one. While you denied sustenance to the fox, you blessed him, for I forgive the fleeter footed. And while the fox permitted you to eat his portion with your own, he cursed you, and I will requite your appetite with my own.’

The jackal, as the lion tore the flesh from his bones, lamented, ‘My own appetite has consumed me. Hunger kills even when indulged.’”

Herod said, “To what end will I deny myself the freedom of fulfilling my desires and seeking my passions? What value is there in this self-denial? Why not enjoy the brief freedom of self-indulgence? I would rather rule an hour on my throne than toil a lifetime in the service of any other.”

John replied, “There is no freedom; only service. You live and die in utter servitude and the more you chase after your passions, the more your passions rule over you and the more enslaved you become.

The king’s hawk was flying through the forest and, seeing a raven, recoiled at the vision of his charcoal feathers and midnight eyes.

The raven saw the hawk in the livery of the king and he too recoiled, saying, ‘O wretched hawk, why have you permitted that king to make a prisoner of you? Leave the service of that unworthy one and join me.’

The hawk said, ‘I am the captive of the king’s hand and a slave to his will. I seek no will apart from his and in the prison of his generosity I choose to abide.’

The raven said, ‘You don’t need his generosity. He ensnares you with scraps from his table, but truly freedom from his tyranny is more delightful than the morsels he offers.’

The hawk said, 'Do you consider yourself free?'

The raven said, 'Of course! Nothing is forbidden me. No law binds me. I am truly free.'

The hawk declared, 'Yet every time I see you, you are busily feasting on corpses. If by freedom you mean freedom to make obeisance to your appetites and to fatten yourself on filthy carrion, then I will prefer my captivity. We are all born slaves in this world, but have free will enough to choose between masters.'"

John said, "Unless you serve the Creator of the world, what sovereignty will you have over His creation? You imagine yourself king over great dominions, but this is a test and an illusion."

Herod said, "Why does he deal in such opposites? If his justice seems like tyranny and if my kingship is in truth slavery, why doesn't he make this evident?"

John said, "He makes it evident. To make your way clearer and to help you discern truth from error, God sends warners. But that the people respond or fail to respond to the admonitions of God is their own responsibility. If they are given guidance and err, it is never because God's warners were unclear, but because their listeners were unwilling.

A young sharif journeyed into the desert with a caravan of Bedouin traders. Because the sharif had never experienced life in the desert, his father had charged Nadhir, the leader of the caravan, to keep the sharif out of danger.

On the first night in the desert, the traders camped in the shadow of a great dune, behind which rose the crescent moon. And while the sharif was reclining in the sand and staring at the shimmering constellations overhead, he began drifting to sleep. Nadhir knelt by him and said to him, 'Friend, this place is beautiful and apart from our horses and camels, seemingly lifeless. But there are other travellers in the desert. There lives in these very sands the camel spider. It is a flesh-eater and does not care whether it feasts on horses or camels or on men.'

The sharif was alarmed by Nadhir's warning, and said, 'But I will know if it bites me while I sleep. If it bites I will kill it.'

Nadhir said, 'I warn you because you cannot feel its bite at all. I have known men who slept too soundly in the sands. They awoke in agony with their faces eaten away.'

The sharif's drowsiness at once abandoned him. He said, 'Then I will be on my guard.'

All that night the sharif barely slept, and kept one eye on the sands before his face, fearful that he should become a victim of the camel spider's hunger for flesh. And though no spider appeared, he was grateful for Nadhir's warning and doubly grateful for the sunrise.

After many days in the desert, the caravan at last arrived in a village in an oasis in the midst of this wasteland. They stopped to purchase supplies and trade goods. The local harlots paraded before them, calling out to them sweetly. The sharif watched these young women lustfully. Nadhir approached him, saying, 'My friend, do not let these harlots seduce you. Abstain from their charms and shun their kisses. They have been with a thousand men before you. Do not patronize them. Their wares are disease and death.'

Now the sharif did not heed these words, but spent the night with a girl of particular beauty and paid her handsomely for her indulgences with him. But within several days, the sharif fell ill from the disease which she had carried. He lay in bed dying from it.

Nadhir looked after the youth in his final hours. But the sharif became angry with him, demanding, 'Why didn't you warn me of this fate?'

Nadhir said, 'Indeed I did, sharif.'

The sharif replied, 'Not sufficiently! Why didn't you restrain me? Why did you trust that I should follow your advice without greater admonition?'

Nadhir answered, 'But sharif, I told you in a few words the dangers of the camel spider, and you heeded those words directly and without hesitation. It was not that my second warning was

unconvincing, but that your appetite was more persuasive. And though the danger was the same, the girl's good looks were more enticing to you than the camel spider.'"

Herod said, "But why does he send warners? What does he gain?"

John said, "For Him, nothing. But the father loved his child and sent a warner to him. That is the tie between the Creator and His creatures. It is love.

He does not need you and nothing you do can affect Him. His creation abides with or without you and only in arrogance do men imagine ownership of the world. But you do need Him. What gardener ever believed his flowers were required by the sun, seeing even that they turn their faces toward it every day? As the sun beckons the world with the rays of its light, so too does God call on you, not because He needs you, but because He loves you and provides what is best for you, though you do not know it. Whether the flower opens itself to the sun or not has no effect on the rising and the setting of the sun. But if the sun does not rise, what becomes of the flower? This is the essence of love, though no word expresses it."

v.

After John said this, Herod asked, "What has your god to do with love?"

John said, "How can I speak of love in words you will understand? Words cannot unravel the mysteries of love; indeed, they obscure. A man who calls on words to describe that which soars above the plane of description calls on clouds to describe the sun, turns to the sand to explain the sea.

How many are the great men who have succumbed to love, having given up all they possessed and having turned their backs on the world? Yet you wish me to recite to you the meanings of love. I can answer only that it is beyond my expression and doubly beyond your comprehension.

Poets of merit, when speaking of love, are scribblers of the lowest order. Like the Israelites awaiting Moses beneath the shadow of the mountain, they set up idols to represent the God they do not comprehend. But when Moses returns, he condemns them. Every day some scribbler expounds on love, and makes his words idols to represent the thing he cannot bear. And the ink that men have spilled in the path of love darkens even the blood of martyrs who, truly knowing love, dared not breathe a word of it.

How long will you worship your desires and affix on them your words of love, neglecting even that King of Love who has your life in the palm of His hand? Love of God is submission to His Will. He who does not renounce himself, giving up his life, his loves, his all in the name of God, is not worthy to be called a lover of God. But he who loves God and who surrenders himself to God, his heart will be at peace even in the midst of terrible contention, his soul will be at rest even on the Last Day.

Oceans of ink can no more account for love than can oceans of blood account for Him for Whom it is shed. Even as no worship, no praise befits Him for Whom all worship and praise are fashioned, so can no word describe that thing which shuns words, which speaks not but is hearkened to, which directs not but leaves nothing undirected. Without love the sun could not rise, nor the orbs of the heavens remain in their courses. The Maker of all the worlds loves His creatures. For what other reason were they made? There is nothing that we can provide Him, we who are wholly in His grasp. And were He to withdraw His affection, all that is would cease to be. Not a single breath is drawn without His explicit command.

Love and this alone is worthy of you. And he can only be called a lover of God who disregards the world wholly, except that he sees the face of the Friend in it."

Herod said, "Such love is impossible. He asks too much of men."

John replied, "He asks nothing of us beyond our capacity.

A man named Abbud wished to worship God. Carefully and closely he adhered to the outward obligations of his faith, by praying the prescribed number of times each day and by fasting during the prescribed month, by giving alms and by showing forth such mercy and justice that all considered him a friend and a man destined for paradise. But Abbud’s heart was troubled. He did not feel himself worthy of God. Although he was widely regarded as a true believer, he considered himself truly wayward. He had read and heard that to worship God he must detach himself from all that is in Heaven and all that is on Earth. He loved his wife and his children and he felt guilty for the love and affection he showered on them, for these loves, he imagined, distracted him from the love of God.

Abbud went to Konia to speak with a well-known Sufi master there. In audience with him, Abbud addressed to him his concern. ‘Maulana, how will I love God and be detached from all that is in Heaven and on Earth? I love my wife and my children very much. How can I sacrifice my love for them that I may achieve that love of God alone and for His sake?’

The master said, ‘Your love for wife and children is not incompatible with love of God alone and for His sake.’

Abbud said, ‘But, Maulana, if I love them and place them in my affection and love God and place Him in my affection, am I not making them partners with God?’

The master laughed and replied, ‘I have never heard one believe that love of family was idolatry. Detachment does not mean to love no one and care for no one. God wishes you to love Him, before all, above all that is and without rival. Consider the prophets themselves; did they not love? Did they not weep at the loss of loved ones? Do you imagine yourself to be held to a higher standard than they? Their standard is the highest.

Consider the stars. When I was young I loved them and squinted at their light, knowing the constellations and the movements of the planets. Now if a star disappeared one night, I would be

filled with consternation. And if on that same night, another star appeared where before there had never been one, I should be filled with awe, for these are the signs of the Lord. This is the essence of detachment.'

Now Maulana saw in Abbud's eyes that he did not understand him, so the master asked him, 'Why do you love your wife?'

And Abbud praised her merits unceasingly: her generosity, her character and her beauty.

'Each word of praise you have bestowed on your wife is also a sign of God. Your love for your wife is the love for God in her. And her love for you is the sign of those attributes of God in you. And your love for your children and their love for you, these also are signs of God's love for you and your love for Him. Would you bless the sun by rejecting the rays of its light? Ascetics who hide in dark caves to worship the sun, know nothing of the sun. Saints who withdraw themselves and their hearts from their wives and children have indeed withdrawn themselves from the presence of God among men. They are truly wayward. Not you, Abbud, but they.'"

John said, "He asks nothing that is impossible of us, though we may imagine it impossible to ourselves. Too often, that thing we call impossible is merely contrary to our desires. Love Him more than yourself, or you will lose yourself. The lover must obey his beloved in all things, for love lies beyond faith and reason. Love rules on a throne of madness. In love, obey. The lover who does not obey, relies on himself and his reason. In the court of His Oneness, this is an abomination.

A young man was in love with a girl and had been parted from her for a long time. He eagerly awaited a promised letter from her. When it arrived, he fell hungrily on the words. In the letter, she assured the youth that she would meet him that next day, but wrote: "Before you meet me in the marketplace, make certain you have trimmed your beard short. Also, do not wear your sword when you leave your house to meet me. Thus, when I seek you out in the marketplace, I will know you."

Now the lover, who happily noted the passion of her words of devotion, ignored these instructions, for they did not please him. He thought it unmanly to go out with a beard trimmed short and without a sword. Therefore, he did not shave nor trim his hair, and he wore his sword in the marketplace.

Discerning the face of his beloved in the crowd, the lover rushed forward to greet her, embraced her and kissed her roughly. She pulled away from the youth and demanded, 'Who are you? I do not know you!'

Stricken by these harsh words, he said, 'I am your heart's desire. You are my beloved.'

Again she replied, 'I do not know you.'

The youth withdrew from his pocket the letter she had sent him, saying, 'You are faithless. Here is my proof. You sent this to me, having filled it with words of such sweetness and passion that my heart was overcome. Yet now you reject me!'

The beloved replied, 'You are wrong to accuse me, and in this there is terrible sin. I sent a letter to my lover and filled it with tokens of my affection. But you were not the rightful recipient. A true lover of mine would have respected my requests. He would not have begrudged me these simple favors. Consider who is faithless. Is it me? I came here to find my lover. Or is it him? I find him nowhere.'"

John said, "Those believers whom He leads aright, they discover the true meaning of love. At peace they remember Him and also in contention. In their houses they rejoice in His name and also in the gravepit.

A young and handsome prince, whose name is remembered as Nilesh, led his army to great conquests in the east. He conquered city after city and overran the lands which opposed him. Now the people of the east were terrified of him. All manner of rumor had been spread about him. They said he was bloodthirsty and cruel and avaricious, though in truth he was none of these things, but rather was adorned with every virtue.

Now the prince's military campaign in Rajasthan was crowned with great success and, as this prince was dividing the spoils of war between himself and his lieutenants, his eyes alighted upon a girl across the river which separated his palace from the farmers' fields. From his porch he saw her, she who was supremely unaware of him. A red shawl covered her head, and her long black locks spilt out from under it, and she wore on her slender form a necklace of sweet-smelling flowers.

The prince gazed on her and he decided to have her, to make this beautiful farm girl his wife and queen over his dominions. Stricken by her beauty, the prince had her brought to him. He asked her name. Terrified in the presence of one so feared and reviled by the people, she trembled, but spoke the word 'Lakshmi,' which was her name. When asked of her family, she declared herself an orphan.

Pitying her and smiling on this beauty of the village, the prince gave her precious gifts. He bid his attendants take her from him, to prepare her for his company. They bathed her in rosewater and braided her black hair, adorning it with beautiful flowers. Jewels they affixed to her nose and her delicate ears. Rings of gold they placed on her long fingers, and bangles they wrapped around her wrists and ankles. She was clothed in finery of silk dyed with indigo. She was returned to the prince, who beheld her with even greater joy.

The prince was generous with this farm girl and when she became his wife, he made her not only his wife, but his queen to rule with him. He built for her a throne of gold where she might sit beside him. Lakshmi became the envy of all women, and her every wish was realized. Her husband, the prince, was handsome and kind and wholly devoted to her well-being. He who once had kindled terror in her heart, now was her patient lover.

One day the prince found Lakshmi weeping. Taking her hand, he knelt before her and asked, 'Why are you crying? You are my wife and my queen. The nations of men array themselves before you, ready to obey.'

Lakshmi replied, 'When I was younger, how often my father and mother frightened me with threats of you! And on the day you brought me to your palace, they wept and moaned, "What is to become of our daughter?" They cowered at the very mention of your name, and they begged me to tell you that I was an orphan lest you come and take them away to your palace also. In their fear of you, they bid me disown them, and in haste they fled the village.'

The prince smiled at this and wiped the tears from the face of his beloved. He said, 'Where are they now, when they should see you sitting here?'

Lakshmi smiled at her prince and kissed his hand, saying, 'They feared you as men fear death. They fled unknowingly from paradise.'

One morning, Nilesh bid his wife farewell as he prepared to hunt in the wilderness. And as she embraced him and kissed him on his lips, he took her face in his hands and whispered into her ear, 'When the sun has set, meet me at the river Kawthar, at the bridge over it, and you will repose with me in my tent and in the couch of my embrace.'

All day she waited anxiously, scarcely able to eat, distracted by the absence of her beloved, eager that she might set eyes on him soon. She occupied herself with little chores, gathering fruits with her handmaidens in the palace garden. As the afternoon waned, she bathed herself in sweet rosewater, and her handmaidens dressed her in a yellow sari. They held her mirror as she applied collyrium to her eyes and painted her lips. They braided her hair and perfumed her body with sweet perfumes.

As Lakshmi prepared to leave the palace, to meet Nilesh by the waters of the river Kawthar, the sky darkened and a terrible gale blew over the land. Storm winds howled through the halls of the palace, thunder shook the trees of the forest, and lightning scorched the earth. Lakshmi's handmaids cowered in the palace and were afraid to step out of their rooms or even to a window.

Unconcerned by the gale's fury, Lakshmi went out into the storm to meet Nilesh. Her maidservants pleaded with her, 'Do not go, my lady. The storm is too powerful and you will lose your way.'

Undaunted, Lakshmi waved away their concerns. Her maidservants cried out, 'The prince will understand that you cannot meet him tonight. Stay with us where you will be safe.'

Lakshmi answered, 'It is only a little rain, like a spring shower.'

Again they pleaded with her, but she laughed at them, replying, 'It is nothing to me. My husband is more important.'

She left the palace and disappeared into the wind-lashed forest beyond the palace gardens. Now the handmaids turned angrily on Yamini, who was Lakshmi's closest friend but who had said nothing to stop her. They said to her, 'What friend of our lady are you? You, of all of us, could have stopped her. Now she wanders into terrible danger.'

Yamini smiled and told them, 'The true lover who goes out to commune with her beloved will see the darkest clouds as rays of sun, the sharpest stones as cushions for her feet, the hardest rains as soothing collyrium. Indeed, to her the world is as paradise, though she doesn't desire paradise but only the sight of her beloved.'

Through the wilderness, blinded by the pouring rain, deafened by the thunder that rumbled like war drums, Lakshmi wandered in search of the path to the river Kawthar and to the tent of her husband there. Though she thought nothing of the rain or the thunder, her heart was sad and incomparably heavy. She was tormented by the absence of her beloved. She saw no rain, but was blinded by the vision of his face. She heard no thunder, but was deafened by the sound of his name on her lips. A thousand times she spoke his name, and each syllable was a droplet of pain on her heart.

In the midst of this gale, she imagined she caught the scent of him, the smell of sandalwood. But she did not see him, though she

strained her eyes to find some trace of him in her midst. 'Where is the river?' she despaired. She did not recognize her path in the wilderness. She cried, and each tear was a remembrance of separation from him.

As she wandered and meditated on the name of her beloved, a handsome youth approached her. Sensing in his features something akin to the features of her husband, she asked him, 'Has my beloved sent you?'

The youth answered, 'I have watched you wandering in the forest and have wished to possess a beauty like you.'

Lakshmi said, 'Have you seen my husband?'

The young man replied, 'I have come to take you with me, to my kingdom in the mountains; you will forget your husband.' This youth was very handsome, but she thought nothing of him.

Lakshmi said, 'I cannot go with you; I am looking for Nilesh.'

Now the youth became angry and blocked her way, taking the form of a monstrous serpent. She took no notice of this and stepped over his coils, walking around him as though he were another felled tree in her path. The demon said, 'I could destroy you.'

Lakshmi said nothing and continued along her way.

The serpent spit venom, which struck the ground and became a river of wildly flowing waters, the river Kawthar. And the serpent himself was transformed in her sight, becoming a bridge over the river, beyond which stood the lantern-lit tent in which Nilesh waited.

Overjoyed, she ran across the bridge and entered the tent of her beloved. There he stood, greeting her with his embrace. And as they lay together in his bed, she trembled at his touch. When he spoke words of love, Lakshmi blushed and turned her face away from his. He said, 'What am I to do? I speak quiet words of devotion, and yet you turn your face away, you whom the thunder did not frighten. I touch you gently, yet you tremble at my caresses, you whom even the deluge could not disturb. You do not speak a word, you who boldly rejected the demon.'

Lakshmi looked at Nilesh with loving anger, biting her lip. She said, 'Send me away if you'd like.'

Nilesh smiled at her. 'What would become of you, little bird?' And he took her beautiful face between his lotus hands. 'Do you love me or fear me?'

She looked at him with unblinking eyes, relishing the sweetness of his face and inhaling his sandalwood scent. Not for an instant was her heart sated with his presence. She declared, 'Nothing whatsoever can frighten me but separation from you. The world and its trifles are meaningless apart from you.'"

Herod said, "I cannot understand separation when I have never known union."

John answered, "Your separation is proof of union. That you forget the day of your birth is not proof that you were never born. That you ask is a token of the Answerer. That you are ignorant is witness to His knowledge.

A droplet of water resided in a storm cloud, and came to consider this his true home. But the cloud expelled him and sent him on his downward journey. As he descended, the droplet of water beheld a vast ocean below him and despaired. 'What is this abyss before me? A thousand, a million droplets could not rival it. What am I compared to it? In its depths I will be lost forever.'

The ocean replied, 'Do not despair. Be grateful. Do not hesitate at the threshold of my bounty. Enter this paradise I have prepared for you. Do not think that you are lost in my unfathomed depths. You did not make me; I made you as a token of my grace and might. Only that part of you which is transient will perish. Return as I have bidden you, for I have made you as my remembrance and welcome you with delight.'"

vi.

Herod said, "How can I love what I cannot conceive? And how will such love profit me?"

John said, "Who would ask of that munificent King a reward before the prize is even sought? Who would require from Him collateral against His promise?"

Herod laughed at this and remarked: "So the promise is hidden. What value does it have then? Why would I trade my life as king for a gravepit in the name of a love I cannot conceive? My reign is soon over and I will join my fathers in their tombs. Why would I welcome the misery of serving your inscrutable master when, by serving, my life will be over sooner yet? If I believed in your god, I would begin my prostrations each day with a prayer that he respite me from death a thousand years, because I do not want to meet him as quickly as you do."

John answered: "Were He to respite you for a thousand years, you will yet taste the chastisement of a terrible Day. And the near eternity that intervened between yourself and that Day will seem only a moment. And a moment of that terrible Day will weigh more heavily on you than a hundred thousand years of respite. It is better for you to renounce your dominion and all your possessions and die naked and hungry at the hands of your enemies today, than for you to clutch at these things and die in your opulence one hundred years from now. When that Day is on you, there is no respite.

A number of fishermen were caught in a gale and the winds lashed their vessel and the waves threatened to capsize it. These fishermen fell to their knees and wept and pleaded and performed prostrations to their Lord. 'If you deliver us from this gale, we will be forever grateful!' In the bargain there is terrible sin, but men are weak and their Lord is forgiving.

When He delivered them from death and calmed the waters of the sea and withdrew the wind, the fishermen landed on a sandy beach. Crawling from their battered vessel, they came on an object in the sand made in the likeness of a woman. This object, they declared, had delivered them and they paid homage

to it and sacrificed to it, forgetting their promise. And when they took to the sea again, they made obeisance to the object and asked its protection. But the object took no part in their worship and their praise was profitless. The winds grew strong and the waves rose against them. Although they pleaded again to their Lord for deliverance, they had wasted their respite in folly and perversity and were drowned.

Have you not heard it revealed to those who would listen? *Your rebellion will recoil back upon yourselves. The joys of the world are evanescent and its pleasures are but baubles and trinkets to amuse children. How could you preoccupy yourself with such when you will come back to your Lord in the end? Your life in this world is only a frolic and mummery, an ornamentation, a boasting among yourselves of your lusts and riches.*

The fishermen rebelled against their promise. When they were saved, they fell heedless and showed no gratitude. It would have been better had they died in their first trial than to have tasted His mercy only to waste it.

He guides or leads astray whom He will. Those He leads astray are like you, untouched by the sorrows and agonies of life, given dominion over the world, so that their prayers are cold and passionless. Indeed, what have they to pray for? All the joys and treasures of the world are theirs to enjoy. But pain is the companion of His lovers. Tears are His apostles. Pain is better than dominion of the world, for the prayers of the sorrowful come from burning hearts.

He hardens your heart and respites you for an allotted time from that terrible day. But on the Last Day, there is no more respite and you will be called to account for your doings, and the respite you took as a sign that He would not punish you will prove only to have increased you in rebellion. The Praised One revealed: *When We let them taste Our mercy after affliction, they contrive against Our signs.*

If you renounced all that you cherished and lived in abject misery and suffering, and if you died, not today nor yet tomorrow, but instead a thousand years hence, you would, on the Last Day, account your sufferings to be His sweetest mercy. Submit to Him and your reward resides in your submission."

Herod said: "I am asking for a little proof. Have him come down from Heaven. Show me anything. Show me a sign of your god and I will believe and do exactly as I am bidden! Show me a sign that I may be a true lover and fear his anger and seek his pleasure. Bring an angel to your side and let him testify to all that you have said, and I will believe."

John said, "I can give you no sign. By seeing Him, you would fear Him. Though He should be feared, you would worship Him from fear alone. You would make fear a partner with God, and there is no God but God."

Herod said, "This is insane. Give me something other than excuses. At least show me a vision of that reward he promises his believers. Give me a glimpse of paradise and I will worship him to attain to it."

John said, "If you had listened to all I have said to you, you would already have glimpsed paradise. I cannot show it to you any more plainly, lest you see it and lust after it as you lust after things of this world. You would worship Him in hope of attaining to paradise. You would have worshipped paradise and made it a partner with Him. In the court of His Oneness, such worship is no better than apostasy.

Worship Him without fear of Him and without hope of reward. Then you might perform a fitting worship.

Renounce your pride and you will understand that paradise is His strung bow. He draws and the high part becomes low and the low becomes high. Renounce your lusts and you will see that mercy is His curse, deprivation is His blessing. Renounce your riches and you will know that true wealth is poverty in His way.

Worship Him only because you love Him and not for some mean price. Ask for no reward apart from His presence, because He is self-sufficing and nothing can suffice you but Him. But if you offer service to attain to your ends, whether to avert His anger or to acquire from Him some prize, then you will have never truly served Him and you will feel His anger and you will be deprived of reward.

Caliph Ali decided to test the faith and virtue of a certain servant named Asad. This servant, who was merely a stable-boy, wished to demonstrate his love of God and his loyalty to Ali in acts of great courage and fearless battle. Every day he sought out the caliph and clung to him and pathetically pleaded with him, 'Make me a captain of your armies and send me north to fight the Parsis. I will prove my worth in battle!'

One day Ali smiled on him and told him, 'I will make you a captain and send you at the head of an army to seek out a rebellious chieftain.'

At these words, Asad beamed with pride. But Ali said to him, 'I do not want you to do battle. Go to the chieftain Numan and ask him why he has abandoned the faith to which he swore homage in the presence of Ahmad, peace be upon him. Ask him why and deliver his answer to me. Do this thing for me, and I will adopt you as my own son.'

Now when Asad led his army north, he did not obey Ali's instructions, but made war on the chieftain Numan, driving him into the desert and conquering the lands to which he held title. Numan was murdered by his own people. They cared nothing for their chieftain's resistance to Asad and feared the soldiers of the God in whom Numan's people still believed.

Asad concluded his war and returned to Mecca, resplendent on his horse, leading an army of proud soldiers and a caravan of the richest tribute. The people hailed him as the conqueror of the north, and his soldiers esteemed him as the most blessed of

generals. He was crowned with every tribute and honor. But when he went to see the caliph, Ali refused to speak with him.

For three days and three nights he pleaded with Ali's guards to let him pass and to speak with the caliph. At last Ali relented and Asad was brought before him. Now when Asad saw the caliph, he bowed before that essence of holiness, and said, 'My lord, I have returned to you with honors and riches that I won for you.'

Ali said, 'I have no more honors and riches than I had when you were a stable-boy.'

Asad protested, 'But my lord, I did battle with Numan and his legions and conquered their land. Their people have returned to the faith of God and have paid to your treasuries tribute for the wrong done you by Numan.'

'Numan did me no wrong. He disbelieved and I sought a reason from him. But his disbelief, indeed the disbelief of all mankind, could have no effect on me, for I am exalted beyond the pettiness of men's minds.'

Ali continued, 'I sent you to question Numan and to return to me with his answer; you have failed me in that simple task.'

Asad said, 'But I have done great things in your name. In your name I have forced the people of Numan to submit. In your name I have exacted a fine tribute from the north. In your name I have won a dozen battles and killed a hundred infidels with my own hands. Surely this is more valuable than the excuses of a mere apostate?'

Ali said, 'You did not perform these acts for me. I sent you to perform a simple task and you failed me. How can I believe that these far greater tasks, to which you lay eager claim, were for my benefit when that simplest of all duties was beyond your ability?'

Forget your rewards and obey Him. Your desire for reward is sufficient witness to your rebellion against Him. Seek Him for His sake before and above all else.

Do not loiter in His garden, though there is none so green or beautiful; seek Him out. If you have come to His threshold for the sake of His threshold, then you will be deprived of Him.

After Ahasuerus banned Vashti from his presence for her disobedience, he decided to take a new bride. He ordered Hegai, the keeper of his women, to bring his concubines into the palace garden. When they were assembled, Ahasuerus said to them: 'I have hidden a treasure here. Find it and show it to me and I will marry you and give you possession of that treasure.'

When the concubines heard this, they were filled with excitement and searched through the garden. Some of them imagined the prize to be jewelry. Others presumed it to be gold and silver. Still others believed the prize was Vashti's own crown which had been taken from her for her disobedience. But Esther, who was the wisest and most beautiful of the women did not move even for a moment. She stood before Ahasuerus as before, smiling at him. He said, 'Are you going to look for the treasure I have hidden?'

Esther said, 'I have found it already.'

Ahasuerus said, 'Show it to me.'

Esther left the garden and returned with her mirror and held it to her king's face, her eyes fixed on him. And when she showed him this, he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. He said to her, 'I was a hidden treasure wishing to be known.'"

vii.

Herod traded eternity for a single dance. He stumbled over the Joseph of truth but, like the Midianites, cast him away. Ahmad declared: *They hid him as an item of merchandise; but what they did was known to God. And they sold him as worthless for a few paltry dirham.*

For his niece's performance, Herod bartered his soul. He remembered only himself, and thinking himself alone with his thoughts, he accounted himself blameless.

Before Moses climbed up Mount Nebo, to the peak of Pisgah, he said, "God, forgive me this transgression and the one before it."

The Israelites heard him and were perplexed by what he had said. They asked him the meaning of his words.

Moses answered, "I ask for God's forgiveness for breaking faith with Him at the waters of Meribah-Kadesh. And I ask for God's forgiveness for a worse sin. On the day I murdered the Egyptian, I looked to the left and the right and, believing myself alone, I committed murder."

The Israelites said, "Surely your Lord has forgiven you. That man was the willing servant of a tyrant and God made you a prophet."

Moses said, "Let nothing you say touch me! I ask forgiveness for ever having excluded my Lord as witness for all I say and do. I have never been alone, not even for an instant. By believing no one witnessed the murder, I became witness against myself for unbelief.

There is nowhere that you may turn your head that He is not before your eyes. You do not see Him because you are in the way. With a single finger you block out the sun from your eye.

When the Angel of God showed paradise to Adam, he warned Adam of that single tree, saying, 'Do not eat of it. It is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. A taste of its fruit on the lips of one who knows only good will separate you from Him and this is surely death.'

But Adam did not obey and ate of the tree. The instant he tasted the fruit in his mouth, he became suddenly aware of himself. He said, 'I must hide from my Lord who will surely punish me.'

The Angel of God approached him, saying, 'Why are you hiding?'

Adam said, 'I was afraid that He would punish me for my disobedience. I am ashamed and have found myself naked before Him. I ate of the fruit forbidden to me and, in eating, I became aware of myself.'

The Angel of God said, 'Truly, you are dead to Him until you become dead to yourself again. Why did you seek any other than Him?'

Seek truth from no other but Him. In His treasury alone are the treasures of true knowledge. In His palace alone are the comforts of true contentment.

Do not seek an accounting from Him of His doings. He is All-Knowing, All-Wise. Exalted is He above your approval.

Men look upon the curtain and wonder at the mystery it conceals. We all circle it, casting stones or saying prayers to it. Others deny it, and still they circle it. And all the while they peer upon the curtain, thinking behind it is that glimpse of God and that from His ark He stares back. But no man may approach His throne or even lay eyes on Him. To come before Him with faith is blasphemy, for there is none but Him and you are excluded, *unless the king holds out his scepter.*

He does not conceal Himself from you behind the curtain, but whispers to your heart to tear the curtain away and to lay eyes on its mystery. He whispers, 'Destroy what you find concealed for it is an idol.' Do not wait until the Last Day to behold the idol of that mirror. Look upon yourself today and remember all that you have done. Break the idol you have found. You will never unravel His mystery. Is it not enough that He help you unravel your own?"

Herod said, "If I fail to fulfill my vow to Salome, none will account me trustworthy. I must protect my name and my station. I swore an oath to her in the presence of my wife and ministers. How would you have me keep my dignity if not by fulfilling my vow?"

John offered his neck to the sword, "How will He love him who guards his dignity against Him? The one jealous of his own honor, regards not His."

And when John was beheaded, Herod said, "If a single sinner finds favor with Him, he may intercede for me. If he is Mordecai

at the king's gate, perhaps Esther will intervene for those who have gone astray."

Though He will judge me and may reject my cries at His gate, that He cast me out is enough. If He curses me, I will not turn to another than Him. His curse will become my remembrance of Him; His judgment against me and His decree linking me to Him.

There was none so beautiful in the days of King Cyrus as his own daughter. None in the kingdom failed to admire her.

One day, as she was touring the marketplace, a dervish was stricken by the sight of her. The bread that was his only dinner fell from his hand and into the dust. He marvelled at her beauty such that his appetite meant nothing. Her gorgeous and radiant face blinded him to anything else.

The princess saw this dervish in his tattered robes, covered in dirt, and his mouth agape. She smiled on him as she passed by. When her eyes fell on him, the dervish lost all sense and fainted away as though dead.

For nine years he remained in sublime ecstasy, cherishing the memory of her glance. Like a stray dog, he followed the one who had shown him a single kindness. But this was to him more valuable than a kingdom of gold.

Every night he slept on the street in sight of her palace. During the day, this restless soul exerted himself only to glimpse her face again.

At last, her servants said, "He is a nuisance and a danger to you. Let us kill him."

But she told them, "No. Bring him to me and I will show him where things stand."

When the dervish was brought into her presence, he fell to his knees on the ground adoringly. But the princess said, "Why do you do this? Why do you persist after me? There can be nothing between us."

He answered, "There is nothing left for me. Even if my praise does not befit you, I cannot keep from praising. Even if my love

is beneath your contempt, I cannot help but love you. You are the sun and the moon in the heaven of my heart. A hundred suns in their brilliance could not obscure my vision of you since the day you smiled on me."

She said, "I curse the day I smiled on you. You are a fool. I did not smile for love, but out of pity because you are a pathetic sight."

The dervish answered, "This is so. But I would have loved you even had you spit on me in contempt. I loved you not for a smile, but that your eyes fell on me at all, whether cursing or loving."

My Lord, forgive me. I am a *halif* among the believers.

*Nothing can blot out my remembrance of You.*
*I am a snake with a broken head and cannot turn.*

# 2

# THE MADNESS OF GOD

i.

The believers have performed ablutions in their own blood; my ablution in ink is poor. In the name of the Most Pure, you who read these words, remember me in your prayers. Remember me so that He may remember me. Intercede for this scribbler that his Author may forgive him. Surely my effort has earned a syllable of kindness from your lips.

Have you spoken of this world to those yet unborn? How do you convey it? What is sufficient analogy? Speak to a man of the divine. To his ears, what you say is madness.

Squinting at the Kaaba—what do you know of it? If it reveals itself to you, you cannot speak a word of it. It cannot be conveyed. Every epiphany is completely unique, is completely new with you. If it is common, it is not divine. If words express it, you have not found it.

Be quiet. Your words are not the end of the matter. They are not the balance. Words weigh against words, nothing more. If words express it, you have not found it.

*Your reason cannot measure nor explain;*
*Nor can you comprehend—therefore refrain.*
*Be wary of this weight; your balance flawed*
*Is never cause for beggars to complain.*

Your words and your sciences, how will these avail you? *Knowledge walks on crooked legs, but death comes on a charger.*

ii.

O Merciful One, there is no other God than You. You are the Creator, the Uncreated. You are the All-Seeing, the Unseen. You are immanent in Your creation. No knowledge encompasses You, You whose knowledge encompasses all things. No sight can take You in; no word can describe You; no praise befits You. You stand within Your creation, but Your creation is not You.

O Self-Subsisting One, nothing whatsoever in Your creation can help or harm You.

O Knowing One, the world is Yours, but You are not the world. You define creation, but are not defined by it. The world is Your token. You possess, but are not possessed. You encompass, but cannot be encompassed. You are above the world, but stand always in the midst of it. You cannot be comprehended through Your creation. And Your creation cannot be comprehended except through You.

There are those who say, “God is in all things,” and this is true. But those who say, “All things are God,” have erred. Men who worship the world, imagining it their Lord, take partners to God.

In every word, the stroke of each letter is a token of Your power. The strength of this hand is, in truth, a sign of Your tolerant mercy. Gratitude is owed to You even by those who in their writings deny You—for what hand may move except by Your leave?

This helpless servant asks that You not let his hand go much astray in praising and remembering You, though You have need of neither praise nor remembrance.

O my God, if a single letter of this poor tablet finds favor with You, deliver me from the fires of perdition. Let this thirsty one drink a little from the fountain of Your mercy. Let this tired one rest his head at the threshold of Your loving kindness.

O my Lord, from the believers I ask a small wage, but from You I ask only mercy. I have taken from Your hand and been ungrateful.

O my God, whoever opposes You opposes only himself. Your enemies are as kindling to the fire, crying out, “We will smother You and put You out!” But the fire grows for their opposition.

You decide all outcomes and I am not asked. I am pinioned and the Hoopoe pities me, for I am not yet Your friend, whatever I profess!

I remember the words You revealed to Ahmad. When You said to the angels, “I will place a trustee on the earth,” they said, “Will

You place one there who sheds blood while we praise You and sanctify Your name?"

You said to the angels, "I know what you do not know. I know the secrets of the worlds. I know what you disclose and what you hide. I did not call you to witness the creation of the heavens and the earth, nor your own creation. By what right do you question Me? I will create man from clay; I will give him form and shape. When I have fashioned him and breathed My Spirit into him, fall down before him in homage."

After You had made him and breathed Your Spirit into him the angels bowed before Adam; all except Iblis. He disdained and became insolent. He was filled with pride and rebelled against his Lord. You said, "Iblis, what prevents you from bowing down as I command you? What hinders you from adoring what I create in My majesty? Are you proud even in My presence?"

Iblis said, "Look at what You honor above me! I am better than he! You created me from fire. Can I bow down before a mortal whom You created from clay?"

You said, "You have no right to be insolent here. You are damned."

Iblis said, "If You defer Your judgement until the Last Day, I will bring mankind into complete submission."

You said, "I will respite you. You are among the reprieved until the Last Day."

Iblis said, "O Lord, since You led me into error, by Your authority I will lead them astray. I will beguile them with the pleasures of the world. I will lie in wait for them along Your straight path. I will come upon them from the front and behind, from the right and left. You will not find many of them who are grateful."

You said, "This is right by Me, and what I say is right. Except for those who fall into error and follow you, you will have no power over My creatures. Your Lord is sufficient as their protector. Leave Me! You are rejected! As for those who follow you; I will fill up Hell with all of you!"

iii.

The Christian monk Bahira lived in Syria, in the city of Busra. He was little known and seldom noticed. He was a catechist and a scholar, affording his simple life with meager stipends he received for providing instruction.

In Busra a community of Marcionites had grown up around a collection of disreputable Gospels purporting to reveal the hidden teachings of Christ. The Holy Church refused to acknowledge the Marcionites as fellow Christians. After many years the Marcionites were overshadowed by those who called them heretics. But the Marcionites persisted; they eagerly entered into disputations with Christians in hopes of finding converts to their shrinking cause. For them, marriage and procreation were forbidden. Only by conversion could their faith survive.

One day a student came to Bahira, to be instructed by him. He offered to pay Bahira a substantial wage. But Bahira found him full of heretical falsehoods and suspected that he was sent by the Marcionites. He would not teach him. The student said, "If I am ignorant, how will I learn except that you instruct me?"

Bahira said, "The doctor effects no cure who himself dies of the disease. The instruction you have received is virulent. The untruths you have imbibed know no remedy. When the well is poisoned, it is not enough to drink only a thimbleful; one must not drink at all."

The student said, "You believe in God the Father, the God of our savior?"

Bahira said, "Of course."

The student said, "So do I. Do you believe in the god of Moses and Abraham?"

Bahira said, "I will not instruct you."

The youth said, "Then I will instruct you. Listen to me; I will only speak words. Are they so dangerous? You are a scholar. If I lie, you will catch me. Listen to me; truth is weighed in the

balance of words. I would speak a little with you, and yet you act as though my mouth watered for your blood."

Bahira said, "I have answered you; I will not instruct you."

The youth said, "Then say nothing. But let me speak; I will not try to draw you out.

There is not a single God. The Magians are right when they say 'There is Ahura Mazda who is good, from whom all good comes and to whom all good returns in the end. And there is Ahriman who is evil, from whom all evil things come and to whom all evil returns in the end.' To suggest that evil has its source in Ahura Mazda is absurd. *For there is no good tree that produces corrupt fruit, nor corrupt tree that produces good fruit. For each tree is known by its own fruit.*"

Bahira said, "Are you a Marcionite or a Zoroastrian? Do you remember how the Magian priests conspired against Mani even when they agreed with him? And if he could not prevail against them who believed like him in dualism, how will you prevail against me, a monotheist?"

The youth said, "I will prevail because you believe in a god who contradicts himself. You are a scholar before you are a priest. You cannot endure that which contradicts your reason. You were right to turn me away. When I am done, whether you join me or turn your back on me, you will no longer be a priest."

Bahira said, "There is only one God. There is no God but Him. Over the world He exerts complete power; if not, He would not be worthy of the name God."

The youth said, "Consider: the world is imperfect and man is imperfect. Therefore, the one who created the world and created man is likewise imperfect. Yet your one god will not admit imperfection. How do you explain it?

Consider: the world is evil and man is evil. Therefore, the one who made the world and made man is likewise evil. Yet you consider your one god only good. How do you reconcile this?

Your god is the Demiurge, the builder, the Hebrew god called Yahweh. He created the world and, because his heart was evil, the world he made was evil and thus this flesh is poison to us. The Demiurge hates us; for in the Garden we did what he forbade us to do and we ate of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. And when we learned to distinguish truth from falsehood and good from evil, we became powerful like him, and he cast us from his poor paradise. He said, *Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil.*

We discovered the Demiurge as he was, powerful but not all-powerful. Yet even after we discovered the truth, he sought to rule over us as though we were chattel. But God the Father, from Whom all good comes and to Whom all good returns, sent us Jesus so that he might free us from the tyrant Demiurge, that he might free our souls from this evil world and this worthless flesh. God the Father is not like the Demiurge. He does not fear us or hate us. He does not want to punish us or debase us, and wants no harm to come to us. God the Father is All-Merciful and the Demiurge is capricious and monstrous and punishes for no reason except to inflict punishment. God the Father is the First Principle; He is Love; He is the Source and the Forthgoing. Against Him is the Demiurge who made us; but in the end the Father will deliver us from the tyranny of the Demiurge. How else can you reconcile the good and merciful God whom Jesus calls Father with the murderer and monster who kills the innocent because he himself has hardened a king's heart?

If there is one God, and God the Father and Yahweh are the same, then God is insane. Can you explain His madness? You must renounce your monotheism; turn away from the whisperings of the Demiurge! And when you have done this, the door to divine knowledge will open to you; that is why your priests and bishops renounce us and tell you not to speak with us. For if we open your eyes, who will tithe to them? Who will pay for their cathedrals and banquets and mistresses? You Christian

priests are truly priests of the Demiurge like the Hebrews before you. You foist upon the world such unbelievable fictions!"

The youth cast down at Bahira's feet torn pieces of the Torah.

Bahira turned away from the youth and said, "You have damned me." And from that day, doubt, like a black sea, washed over him. He withdrew from the church and secluded himself. He continued to accept students, but would not share his doubts with them. He thought, "What the Marcionites believe is absurd." Yet he could not exorcise from his thoughts the words, "Can you explain His madness?" Nor could he put out of his mind the many horrors of the world, for which the one God must ultimately be responsible. He had once declared, "If the Christian faith is untrue, then there is no God." Now the Marcionites had unraveled this faith, and he doubted even the existence of God.

Bahira remained a scholar, and he indulged himself in books of his faith and the faith of his fathers. He was no longer found at his prayers, but always in his books. He said, "Is there a more sincere prayer to my Lord?"

But Bahira had interest, not belief. He immersed himself in the books of his faith, but found no faith in them for himself. Nowhere could he find an antidote to the Marcionite's words; and the further he was in error, the more desperately he sought correction in tome after tome. Yet whatever belief his heart snared, his mind bled it out.

However, in one page of prophecy he took some comfort. He said, "If what this passage says is true, I am delivered."

Years later, when he was fasting, he recited the passage again and again. In the midst of his meditation he heard the words, "It is done."

He fell back in surprise. His jaw hung agape. He turned over his books and closed his eyes against the world. He prayed for hours, fixing his thoughts on God, placing his doubts at the altar of His mercy. Again he heard the words, "It is done."

In the morning, he sent his students to the market to purchase food for a banquet. When they returned, he instructed them to prepare it for that evening. Then, Bahira left them and went to the market himself.

He came upon the men of a merchant caravan from Arabia. He spoke to their leader, Abu Talib. He said, “What tribe are you from?”

Abu Talib said, “We are Quraysh.”

Bahira said, “You must come to my home. I have prepared food for you. Bring your tribesmen who have come to Busra, whether they are men or children, slaves or free.”

Abu Talib said, “By al-Lat and al-Uzza, what has come over you? You do not know us; we have never spoken before.”

Bahira said, “This is true. But you and the members of your caravan will be my guests.”

Abu Talib did not refuse. He and the other men of the Quraysh gathered together and left only Muhammad behind, to watch over their baggage. They ate with Bahira and were served by his students. Bahira treated his guests with every kindness. Bahira spoke at length with each of them, but did not find the mark on any one of them, the mark described in the passage.

He said, “Are you all the Quraysh in Busra? Have you left any of your caravan behind? They must all come to my house.”

One of the Quraysh said, “By al-Lat, you are right. We have left one behind, but he is just a boy.”

Bahira said, “Tell me where he is and I will fetch him here.”

Abu Talib told him. Bahira left his guests in his servants’ care and sought out the boy. Not far away, he found him under a great tree, watching over the caravan’s baggage. Bahira spoke gently to him, but studied him carefully, and found the traces of what he sought.

He said, “I did not believe until I found you.”

Muhammad said nothing; he sat quietly. Bahira said, “By al-Lat and al-Uzza, you must answer my question.”

Muhammad said, “Do not swear by al-Lat and al-Uzza. Their names are an abomination on your lips.”

“Then by God, will you answer my question?”

Muhammad said, “Ask me whatever you will.”

Bahira began to question him about his name and his family, but Muhammad interrupted him. He said to Bahira, “This is not the question you wish to put to me.”

Bahira said, “Turn your back to me for a moment.” And when Muhammad did, Bahira saw the seal of prophethood between his shoulders, as described in the passage upon which he had placed his hopes. When he saw this, the fountain of his speech was stopped up and the well of his thought went dry. Bahira’s vision went black and his eyes wept blood. Between the boy’s shoulders were written the words, “No god is there but God.” Muhammad turned again to face him, and on his chest in crimson ink was written the Ineffable Name. When it was revealed, the world groaned with the weight of it and the stars turned back in their courses.

“My Lord,” Bahira said, “I am powerless. My heart is ashes. I have waited years and have never before now found one who might answer my question.”

Muhammad said, “Ask your question.”

Bahira said, “My Lord, I do not understand God’s Unity. I see in the world both good and evil and know He is not the master of evil. Yet if He lacks power over evil, then He is not worthy to be called God, and I know Him to be All-Powerful. If this world is perverse, how is it God’s? If it is not His, where is His power?”

Muhammad said, “From the tower of reason, the city of His Unity is hidden. Put your doubts aside. Instruction in His Unity is dangerous and the wanderer easily loses his way. You could not bear the knowledge you desire. Will you not trust and have faith in God? He will suffice you.

You cannot know the ends to which all this was purposed. Should a near-sighted man judge the mountaintops? Refrain from reason and judgment in this matter.

Balamah, the queen of Sheba, imagined herself the wisest and most powerful monarch in the world. But nightly she dreamed of a man on her throne, ruling over her kingdom in her place. His face was like the sun rising in the east. Around him were arrayed demons, djinns and men, all servants standing in his presence as he sat on her throne. She dreaded the obvious meaning of this dream, but divulged it to no one.

Word came to her of the king of Israel, of his wealth and power. The Hoopoe delivered Solomon's message to her, demanding that she abandon worship of the sun and submit to God. To put him off, she sent a caravan of gifts of great value to Israel. But Solomon sent the caravan back to Sheba with a message for the queen: 'You cannot increase my wealth; submit to me and I will increase yours. If you will not renounce the sun as your god, I will lead armies against you and drive your people into the sea.'

Balamah read these words and said, 'I will not renounce my god without testing this king.' She prepared her retinue, gathered together greater and more valuable gifts to offer Solomon, and set out for Israel.

When she arrived in Jerusalem, Solomon sent Benaiah to meet her. When the queen saw him, she imagined he was the king, for she had never set eyes on one so handsome or well-attired with so large a bodyguard. Balamah descended from her howdah to speak with him. Benaiah said, 'Why have you come down from your howdah?'

Balamah said, 'You are King Solomon.'

Benaiah said, 'I am his servant.'

The queen turned to her nobles, 'I have never seen the lion, but I am satisfied with a view of his lair. I have never seen the beauty of the king, but the beauty of his servant is sufficient.'

Benaiah said, 'The king invites you to his palace where he may speak to you privately, but you must come alone. And do not bring anything that belongs to you; it would be an abomination to the king. If you are found in his palace with a single possession

everything that is yours in this world and the next will be forfeited to the king. Before you enter the palace the king's maidservants will take your clothing and all that you carry with you. They will bathe you and anoint you and they will dress you fittingly.'

Benaiah conducted the queen to Solomon's palace, and she found it more gorgeous than she imagined. He took his leave of her and, in the palace courtyard, Solomon's maidservants stripped her and burned her clothing. But she kept a single possession—a tiny idol of the sun in the form of a golden stone, perfectly round in shape. She kept the idol to protect her from the king's power. She concealed it in the palm of her left hand even as they bathed her in rosewater and dressed her in robes more beautiful even than what they destroyed.

The maidservants led Balamah into the palace and to Solomon's throne. Around him were arrayed demons, djinn and men, all servants standing in his presence. Balamah, remembering her dream, recognized his face as that of her usurper. In shock, she dropped the idol she had clutched in her hand. The stone rolled to Benaiah's feet. He picked it up and studied it. Solomon said to him, 'Did you tell her that she was to bring nothing into my house?'

Benaiah said, 'I warned her as you instructed, my lord.'

The king's guards seized the queen's arms. Solomon rose from his throne and approached her. He said, 'You have come into my house, the house of my father. You have brought your puny idol to protect you. Yet now that idol has betrayed you to me. Even the idol you worshipped is my servant. It has delivered you and your kingdom into my hands.'

Balamah said, 'I will not submit to you, except that you answer my questions. If you are as wise as they say, you will answer them readily. If you cannot answer any one of my questions, then you will release me and let me return to my throne.'

Solomon said, 'I will submit to your questions; but if I answer them, you must renounce the sun as your god and worship God.'

She put a hundred questions to him, some that no man had answered before; but Solomon answered them all, as if they were riddles for children. Despairing of her freedom, the queen asked a final question, which she knew Solomon could not answer.

She said, 'Tell me about your Lord's very being.'

When this question reached Solomon's ears, he fell from his throne, unconscious. His contingents broke rank in panic. Balamah rushed to Solomon's side. She pressed her hands to his face, hoping to revive him who seemed dead. She kissed his mouth. Solomon stirred from unconsciousness. He said, 'My Lord provided me with an answer to your question, but I could not bear it. There is too much wine for these skins to contain. I will recite to you what I can.'

She cried out, 'Do not say a word of it! I seek refuge in God from God!' At that moment, she became a believer and submitted to the Lord through Solomon.

Solomon said, 'Your dream was not of me on your throne, but of our son who will rule your kingdom when we are dead.'"

Muhammad said, "Do not ask your Lord what you cannot bear to hear. *Do not take this road; it is not your road to take.*"

Bahira said, "Moses could not bear what Khidr revealed to him, but he took instruction from him nevertheless. I prefer to die on this road than to walk another moment in doubt."

Muhammad did not answer, but followed Bahira to his house. They found the men of the caravan fast asleep with wine. Bahira dismissed his servants and extinguished his lamps while Muhammad ate a little of the food prepared for him.

iv.

In evening stillness, as the crescent moon set in the west, Muhammad brought Bahira to a nearby stable. There, Bahira mounted the Buraq, which was the Mount of Paradise, and Muhammad led him into the countryside, far away from the city and lit only dimly by starlight. Muhammad left Bahira by the source of sweetly-flowing waters.

There Bahira saw a deformed man sitting beneath a withered tree. The man wore a tattered cloak like a dervish and covered his face with his hands while tears of blood flowed copiously from his eyes, filling the stream.

Bahira said, “My Lord has led me here to learn from this Sufi the mysteries of His Oneness. Yet this knower of His Unity hides his face behind a veil of tears. Is this the state to which divine knowledge has brought him? But the Lord is my master and I will obey.”

Bahira heard amidst the tears a song from the lips of the weeping dervish. He drew closer and heard these words:

*In the garden of His love, he sows bitter seeds*
*And tends with salt and brine.*
*To love this One*
*With a love He might accept,*
*Cast away your thoughts for any other,*
*Cast away your love for any other,*
*Then self-love, then all hope, all dreams.*
*At last, cast away your love for Him,*
*For nowhere in His presence*
*Is there room enough for you.*

Bahira crept more closely to the tree, but the dervish heard him and rose up. Black wings unfurled behind him and his hands fell to his side, revealing his devil’s face.

Bahira fell away, cursing the name Iblis as he stumbled back. But Iblis laughed at him, saying, “Bumbler, why would you visit the devil only to curse him and seek protection against him? I did not come to you. I have never bothered you, Bahira. Yet you disturb me and curse me for it?”

Bahira said, “I curse him who is damned; I don’t concern myself with the circumstances.”

Iblis smiled, saying, “You curse me? You curse one who is damned for his curse. So too did I curse Adam, and I was cast down from Heaven for it. You should be more cautious; or are

you like father Adam who was also cast out of Paradise? But Adam and I were cursed by God. What fear have we of Bahira's curse after it?"

Bahira said, "Your fall is not like Adam's fall. Your pride betrayed you and you were insolent in God's court. Adam sinned at your provocation. He too was barred from Paradise but he was contrite and sought forgiveness and was readmitted into God's presence. Yet you remain here, a monster blinded by pride, forever condemned. Adam was better than you; your own exile is witness to your wickedness."

Iblis frowned. "At my provocation Adam sinned? And at whose provocation did I sin? To revile me as blind, as a monster, is to revile yourself. When I worshipped at God's threshold I accused your father Adam and all his progeny in the presence of your Lord. Do you recall that moment? Did you defend your kind in God's presence? Or were you yet unborn? But you come and accuse me. How is it that the accuser is on trial for his accusation, and that he is tried by them whom he accused?

Even Adam did not speak so ill of me; nor did he blame me, though I tempted him to ruin. But he remembered his hand in my destruction. I conspired against him only after God threw me down from Paradise for his sake. Yet you revile me and honor him with meaningless gibberish: 'He was contrite.'

I worshipped God for 700,000 years. No place is left in Heaven or on Earth where I did not bow down to Him. It is unmanly to look upon this worshipper with contempt. Your worship, multiplied even by a thousand lifetimes, is but a spark by the sun of my devotion; is but a droplet by the ocean of my love. Who are you to stand before the angel of your Lord, spitting out your slanders against him? Do not say to your Lord, 'I am better than he!'"

Bahira said, "Then repent! Bow down before Adam as God commanded. Look what your stubbornness has done to you. Look at your black and broken body."

Iblis said, “How could I repent for obeying the will of God? I bow down to none but God, for this is the true command. This was His test, what He commanded us to do, to see if I might break my vow and worship an idol. Look beneath the cloak of His anger and discover the aegis of His love. Look within the mountain of His curse and discern the diamond of His mercy. Do not see my deformity as His punishment. Within a cracked vessel, He conceals a sweet wine.”

Bahira said, “If your love for Him were true, He would not have twisted your features and cast you down from Paradise. Open your eyes, blind one—see what you have become!”

Iblis said, “My love for Him has not altered since the day I stood in His presence. When have you stood with Him? To open your eyes only once to the sun, the sting of it is wondrous truth. But to close your eyes again? Still it burns its mark there. Even in the pitch it shines. If I am blind, still I see His Face!

Do not look on my body and judge me by this alone; I looked on Adam and saw only clay. If I am no more than disfigurement, then you are no more than dust.

Do not be misled by the outward appearance of things...by the apparent nature of things. To be inattentive to inner states is peril to the one who would comprehend the meaning of divine unity.”

Iblis said: “Remember the story of Benjamin, the son of Jacob, when he accompanied his brothers to Egypt and they ate as guests at the table of the Egyptian lord. The Egyptian took Benjamin aside and spoke privately to him, saying: ‘I am Joseph, your lost brother.’ Joseph said, ‘Do not tell your brothers you have found me or that you know me to be alive. They have wronged me and conspired wickedly against me. I will keep you with me by a ruse so that through my deception, they will remember how they deceived our father. Then I will reveal myself to them.’

In the morning, Joseph gave them their provisions, but hid his cup among Benjamin’s possessions. After some time, Joseph’s horsemen stopped the caravan of the sons of Jacob. Joseph’s men

accused them: ‘You are thieves disgracing yourselves with the property of our master!’

Levi said, ‘What are you missing?’

‘Our master’s cup, wrought in gold,’ they answered. ‘We will search your provisions and, should we find it, then the one who has taken it will be our master’s prisoner, never to leave.’

Levi said, ‘This is right by us, but we are innocent.’

When they searched Benjamin’s belongings, they discovered the cup concealed there and Levi cried out in horror. Joseph’s horsemen arrested Benjamin and returned him to their master. This was how Joseph contrived against his brothers; his blessing of one seemed a curse to the others.

‘O Benjamin! How did you come to steal?’

But Benjamin did not protest and said, ‘Should that Egyptian cut my throat, I would water his garden with my blood.’”

Iblis said, “I am faithful to the inner command, even as I disobey the outward seeming.

King Mahmoud was surrounded by sycophants and intriguers. Every smiling face to which he turned seemed to him to mask a scowl. He could trust no one in his court, except his son whom he loved more than his own life. Recognizing the danger of court, the son said to the king, his father, ‘Let us play at disagreement with each other and make a show of it. Then, those who secretly despise you and would betray and destroy you will confide in me their designs.’

The father hesitated to do this, seeing in it too much danger to his son. But the son insisted, and the king agreed. In the presence of the court, therefore, the king and his son began to argue angrily with one another. But none would approach the son, for his love for the king was too well known.

The son said, ‘Father, imprison me so the intriguers will think our disagreement more genuine. Then, perhaps, those men who are dangerous to you will reveal themselves to me.’

Again Mahmoud hesitated, for he did not wish to see his son imprisoned. But again his son insisted and the king agreed. After several months in his father's prison, the son sent word to him secretly. 'None believe our falling out is genuine. Sentence me to some terrible punishment that they might be persuaded. Have your soldiers scourge me and release me. Those who hate you will hasten to my side.'

When the king received his son's message, he cried out in horror. He said, 'How can I do what he asks?'

Several months more passed, and the son languished in prison while the king hesitated to inflict on him an undeserved punishment. At last, the son sent word to Mahmoud, 'If you do not order that I be scourged, the time I have spent in your prison will have been for nothing. Sentence me and have done with it. Do not let soft feelings for me stand in the way.'

At last the king acceded to his son's demands and ordered the punishment. Immediately, those who sought the king's life confided in the son. Released from prison, the son declared himself in open rebellion, promising to unseat his father.

The people reviled the son for this; but the king's enemies, both open and secret, became the son's friends and flatterers. All the while, the son secretly informed his father of everything. Thus, the son protected his father and rendered his opposition harmless.

Because the people of the kingdom loved Mahmoud, they learned to hate the son, never knowing the truth of the matter."

Iblis said: "*No more than He commands must I perform*. I am entirely obedient to the will of God; how else could it be? There is room for no other power but His power. I have no will of my own, else I would have guarded my nearness to God against seeming error, whatever the price. But His court is full of sycophants who love Him because they fear Him. The Lord gave me dominion of the world that His transcendent power may be revealed. My

seeming dominion is a guise; it all belongs to Him. Through me, He exalts Himself. Through battle with me, He puts His creatures to proof.

Do not say that I am man's affliction. Man is my affliction. For Adam's sake, I was cursed. For Adam's sins, I was condemned. What I accused him of, it was all true. Because I would not bow down in dust to worship the son of dust, I was struck down.

In Paradise, my Beloved took the field against me because I could not leave Him. The angels said, 'Iblis is the first to submit. No one loves God more.' But He decreed our separation that men might regard His singleness. He enjoined my disobedience that men might acknowledge His authority. When He commanded me to bow, into my heart He whispered, 'Go and remind them of Me!'

For the sake of men who love nothing except themselves, He discarded my love. I said, 'What is man that You are mindful of him?' But He would not say and He cast me out, though He knew I was blameless.

When the angels praised my love for God, God said, 'They are making an idol out of you, because of your nearness to Me. Through the prism of your faith, I have caught the rays of their faithlessness.' For this reason, that Alchemist made this gold seem like lead. For the sake of the faithless, He disregarded my faith. He said, 'You will bow down to no other but Me.' Then He made man and declared, 'You will all bow down to him.' But I refused, for He enjoined my refusal; He required it. I said, 'To You and no other!' Among the angels and the best of the believers, He found no better monotheist. The host of Paradise said, 'Let us praise one who is other than God, for God commands it.' Then God knew they did not worship Him with a fitting worship. Likewise with men, God said, 'I will give you dominion over them, to find out which of them would follow any other than Me. I will fill up Hell with those who follow you.'

He chose me to rebel; I did not choose rebellion. I fixed my heart on Him from the day He created me to this day today. I was

fashioned to worship Him. I have no choice in the matter. Where in the midst of His transcendent authority has He left a choice for me?"

Bahira said, "Yet you made a choice to reject the spoken command of God. The choice was yours, not His."

Iblis said, "All choices, including mine, belong to Him! He already chose for me. *To Him belong the free choices of all who presume to choose.* And my free choice belongs to Him. If He prevents me from bowing, how will I defy Him? And if He caused me to sin in speech, how will I speak in my defense? And if He had willed that I bow to Adam, I would have been obedient.

Every day I say to Him, 'O God, the sons of Adam reject You and You are generous to them and You exalt them. Yet I, who have loved You and worshipped You with a fitting worship, am made contemptible and deformed.'"

Bahira said, "You liar! Before He cast you out, what did you say? 'I will set my throne above His throne and become like Him.' Do you deny your own testimony?"

Iblis said, "I embrace my testimony. I also said, 'By Your power, I will lead them all astray!' The Lord has given me a throne over His throne that men may be tested when they come to offer worship. I am the prince of the separated ones, and my subjects are all mankind, save those God wishes to preserve. If I have power over men, it is because He wishes me to exercise it. I am nothing except with His leave. With a curse, He made me the keeper of His door.

Would you lay all the crimes of mankind at my feet, as though I committed these crimes? I am the Lord's chamberlain and keep away from His door the unworthy among His creatures. Through me, He reveals the unworthy ones. He says, 'Find those who do not love Me, for those who love Me will be under My protection and beyond the authority I exercise through you.'

To perform these duties for God, you would happily bear this curse. It is no curse at all, to those who look with unalloyed hearts. The sacrifice is the gift. The martyrdom is itself the full reward.

His curse I wear like a golden crown, and I remember His words against me and recite them every moment to savor them."

Iblis said, "And remember the story of Solomon, the son of David, who ruled as king in Jerusalem. The Lord granted him great wisdom and a kingdom to govern, and gave him understanding of the speech of beasts and birds.

One day the king of Israel could not find his companion, the Hoopoe. The king demanded, 'Where are you? You have abandoned me! Where is that bird? If he does not come, I will cut his throat!'

The other birds heard this and sought the Hoopoe. They found him returning from Sheba with news to delight the son of David. But the birds warned him, 'Do not go near Solomon. He noticed your absence and called out your name. When you did not come, he threatened to kill you!'

When the Hoopoe heard this, he shouted with joy and laughed and was in good spirits.

The birds said, 'Were you listening to us? Solomon has a taste for your blood and you act as though he has promised you a crown and a robe of honor!'

The Hoopoe answered, 'The king noticed my absence and uttered my name! Which of you has he remembered thus? If his eyes fall on me while he deprives me of life, he has bestowed on me a thousand better lives. If my name is on his lips, what does it matter if he blesses or curses, for each is a crown and a robe of honor.'"

Iblis said, "Let His curse stand forever; let it extend back to my thousands of years of worship. Let His eye fall upon me with love or with anger. But, in truth, He has set me apart; He has preserved me. When I would not bow before Adam, He said to me, 'Let us play at disagreement with each other and make a show of it. Then, those who secretly despise Me will reveal themselves through you and they will bear witness against themselves on the Last Day.' In secrecy He said, 'Accept the mantle of curse!' Before the angels He

said, 'Iblis is cursed!' They shook and wept; they said, 'If He curses Iblis, the best of angels, who among us is safe from His curse?'"

Bahira said, "I would not make God the bearer of your sins; it is easy for the criminal on the gallows to shout obscenities at the executioner. With the noose around his neck, he may shout to all who will listen: 'The hangman was my accomplice!' But no one would drag the hangman before the judge."

Iblis said, "Your analogy is flawed. It is not the hangman I accuse, it is the Judge Himself. And through His justice, He is always acquitted. Who among the pretended pious would accuse Him of man's disobedience? No, let us make Iblis a partner with God and blame him instead. You hypocrite! Do you imagine that I even for a moment thwarted Him or opposed His desire? Who could withstand His disapproval? There is no power nor might but God! There is nothing left for us; we must be satisfied with what He provides. And nothing is accomplished unless it serves His ends. You are a coward in the face of God's unity, for if I am an enemy of man, then God, through me, is the enemy of man."

Bahira said, "What you say isn't true. God is not man's enemy. How could man endure to have such an enemy? You are the adversary, not the Lord! You are man's enemy. How could He who created man take His creation as His enemy?"

Iblis said, "I too was created. Your accusations exonerate me. Am I the Demiurge? You make me an enemy of God, though I serve Him. Still, as you say, 'Who could endure Him as an enemy?' for nothing exists that He cannot overcome. Thus, He makes use of my enmity for man, all to His ends. So too do I serve man, even as I scourge him. Through me, your true natures are revealed."

Bahira said, "You deceive his creatures; you conceal from them their true selves. You make beautiful to them what is ugly and they defile and abase themselves for it. What form of service is this?"

Iblis said, "I perform His service; I do not seek from Him any accounting for it. I deceive men in this way; but in this wrong

there are a thousand rights. A disciple asked al-Jonaid the true nature of the world, but Jonaid said, 'You could not bear it.' The disciple persisted, but Jonaid rebuked him, saying, 'The knowledge you seek will ruin you. Turn aside from this; ask me any other question.' When the disciple asked Jonaid a third time, Jonaid said, 'I have warned you; let my Lord be my witness against the whisperings of those who will accuse me of your death.' And then he revealed to the disciple the true nature of the world. When the disciple heard the answer, he put out his ears with an awl; but finding in this no relief from his knowledge, he tore out his eyes also. But still he could not bear the world and he immolated himself, declaring from the fire, 'Let no trace of me endure; neither bone nor ash!'

If I am a liar, it is God's lie I am telling. I make the world pleasing to men. I conceal its stench with sweet perfumes and place over its twisted face a veil of surpassing beauty. I make men's actions seem desirable to them. Men who know the true nature of the world find nothing lovely in it. Men who are ignorant, they find it appealing. I am the midwife of their ignorance. If they had perception, they should see through my meager tricks. But they love the world as they conceive it, and I do not dissuade them.

O Bahira, strip away the veil and how will you endure the truth of the world? This wrong has preserved your life. Were I to withdraw this deception, you would fall like Isfendiyar, with Rustem's arrow in your eye."

Bahira said, "Through your deception they place too much value on their lives, to the exclusion of their Lord, and thus know nothing of their true selves."

Iblis said, "No, I reveal to them their true selves. Through my deception, I inspire man's nobility. Were it not for the lie of the value of their lives, which you claim that I inspire, which of them would cling to this world? At once they would all throw off the chains of life to serve Him. But if I conceal the truth of the matter

from them and show them the world as desirable, only those suited to His service willingly give up life to serve; the rest are the dross of creation. Should they place no value on their lives, what value has their sacrifice then? I give meaning to the sacrifice; thus, I separate the wheat from the chaff."

Bahira said, "At your bidding, men starve and war with one another and murder. They put away what God commands them to do; they embrace what God commands them to reject."

Iblis said, "I sink them in misery and hardship; but through misery and hardship the true nature of men is revealed. My Lord said, 'Do what you will to them, only spare their lives. Then We will see the worth of their coin and the sincerity of their love. Hold up for them the mirror of hardship so that they may behold themselves and witness against themselves, whether they are beautiful or ugly. On the Last Day, they will not quarrel as you have quarreled. Their own eyes, their hands, their tongues will witness against them for what they have done.'

In peace and in solace, the nobility of man is concealed; for how will he discover it? In bloodshed and violence and evil, a man's true nature is uncovered! In peace and plenty, a man's life becomes more valuable to him and yet, by your argument, I am the cause of men's selfishness. Still you say I am the cause of hardship and misery. I am the author of neither; I merely act in accordance with the will of my Lord.

When Jesus was a boy, Joseph took him to be instructed by the teacher Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus tried to teach him all the letters from A to Z. He recited them clearly and exactly to Jesus.

Jesus looked at his teacher and said to him: 'How can you teach me the letters of the alphabet? You, who know nothing of the nature of A, can hardly instruct others of the nature of B.' Then he questioned Zacchaeus about the letter A, but Zacchaeus could not answer him.

Jesus said, 'Listen, teacher, to the meaning of A and notice how it has lines. A middle stroke crosses those which, extending

outward at the base, are brought together at the apex, bringing them under a single head and the highest part supporting them. Three lines intersect at three points, each line of equal length. By the mystery of these outward signs, discern the nature of A.'

Zacchaeus covered his ears, saying, 'Take him home, Joseph. No man can bear his instruction. God forbid he might speak of B for the world would be struck dumb. He has carried me away; I cannot understand his meaning. And I am terrified at the glimpse of the truth of a single letter. I am an old man who wants students, yet you bring me a teacher. Take him home, Joseph.'"

Iblis said, "Some believe Jesus spoke of the magic of the letter. Others say it is an allegory of the trinity. Such talk is nonsense. Yet, even knowing this, you are confounded by opposites. You are mystified by the mere appearance of things. Like a single line of A stretching downward, I seem in this world at the farthest point from all that is righteous and pure. Yet in paradise, these lines are joined and knit together, and you do not know that there good and evil are one. I am the white hand of truth, impure and polluted and extended from the shirt of Moses.

I possess the beauty of Joseph and the eloquence of the prophets of old. I lead astray those whom God commands; in this I am wholly obedient. I am the touchstone of wrath for those whom God protects. They do not curse me. It is unmanly to hurl insults at one who exerts no power over the righteous. I am the staff of Moses; God has cast me down to devour serpents among men. I do not act except at His explicit command.

Who led Pharaoh astray? God hardened his heart that His wonder might be manifest to all. Each time, even to his death, Pharaoh hesitated and thought, 'I will be quit of the Hebrews.' But God said, 'Your repentance is not desired,' and cursed him. God created Pharaoh to this end; God required Pharaoh against whom to raise up a Moses. What would He do with a repentant Pharaoh? How silly and unimportant those miracles would become.

To sharpen the sword, He beats it against a stone. Not with tenderness does He cultivate the garden of His creation, but with salt and venom. All to His end—not mine! Who curses me? Have you heard? It is cowardice to curse the King's sword just because it touches your neck. Who wields the sword? Too cowardly to curse the King, you curse His instrument though His instrument is entirely obedient to the will of the King."

Bahira said, "What of free will? Those whom God destroys, against whom He has set you, by your reasoning they are no more guilty than you. But it is not about what men do, or even what you do, but what they intend to do, and there is free will. No, your defense is false. Everything you have said is enough to be a convincing counterfeit—but the coin is still false.

Man will not be damned because of the consequences of his actions, but according to his intentions. The outcome is entirely God's. Thus, if a man's intention is evil and the consequence is good, he is not to be accounted good himself. If his intention is good and the consequence is evil, he is not to be accounted evil himself. The world is not man's kingdom, but all the worlds belong to God. Though Nimrod and Pharaoh conquered and considered themselves 'the lord supreme,' their conquering proceeded from God's ordination. Their pride they forged themselves in the furnace of their ignorance. That Nimrod conquered the world and died from the bite of a gnat was God's command. That Nimrod considered himself *God* was his own doing."

Iblis said, "I accept God's command and do not question Him concerning whom He curses and whom He blesses—for it is all His choice. Nor do I separate volition from action, for I consider no dominion apart from God's dominion.

Who hardened Pharaoh's heart? Who leads astray whom He will? You say Nimrod called himself *God* and this was his own doing, and you exclude God from this; thus you make Nimrod independent of God; you make him His associate. You

make Nimrod into *God* by affixing to him the power to believe something contrary to what God intends him to believe. There is no true opposition to God. If He makes men wicked, then He curses me to punish them. If He makes men good, then He curses me to test them. There is no power nor might but God. He rose up Nimrod to oppose Abraham; he rose up Pharaoh to oppose Moses. He rose up Babylon to cast down Israel. If Muhammad is an instrument of God's mercy, why do you condemn me? I am His instrument of wrath.

The Angel of God announced to Abraham, 'He will destroy these cities.'

Abraham said, 'Would He destroy the innocent with the wicked? If He finds only ten righteous in these cities, will He spare them all?'

The Angel answered, 'Far be it for you to question Him. Trust that He can spare the righteous and yet destroy the wicked. But because He is merciful and you have interceded, He will spare them all His judgment for a time, if ten righteous are found there.'

But how many righteous did the angels of God discover there? Not ten...no, only Lot and his daughters. Not even his wife was spared! Therefore, God destroyed those cities leaving not a trace for living men to find. He would have erased them from history also, except that He sought a demonstration of His tyranny.

When the fire and brimstone rained from Heaven, none of the righteous cursed the fire and none of the angels insulted the brimstone, for these proceeded by God's command and were servants of God's wrath. Only the wicked condemned the fire.

Only wicked men condemn me, for I have power over them. The righteous refrain from condemnation, for they know my true station.

I have no power over men to make them wicked, but their wickedness gives me power over them. The fire from Heaven did

not make the Sodomites wicked; but through their wickedness they brought fire upon themselves.

Yet you condemn me and make me a partner with God in His creation, all because I would not bow. But if He commands me to disobey the outward command, how will I refuse? If He wished me to bow down, certainly it was within His power to make me bow down. Or do you still imagine Him such a weakling that I could oppose Him?

When Moses went up Mount Horeb and heard the voice of his Lord, he said, 'How will I speak for You in Pharaoh's court? I am a murderer and a fugitive from his kingdom. He will not believe me.'

The Angel of God said, 'He will give you five tokens of His power that Pharaoh might believe you.'

When Moses returned to Egypt, Pharaoh said, 'By what name does your God go? Who is the one you Hebrews worship?'

Moses said, 'I Am. By this name is my Lord manifest.'

Pharaoh said, 'You cannot claim this station. You are a murderer and a fugitive. On such a man, a criminal, God cannot confer this station.'

Moses said, 'I am a murderer, this is true. I am also a fugitive from your court; I feared retribution. But I do not come to you as the man who fled from you. I bring you a message from God and tokens of His power.'

Pharaoh said, 'Show me His power.'

Moses said, 'I will give you five signs.' And Moses cast down his staff and it became a serpent, writhing at Pharaoh's feet. Moses reached down and grasped the serpent by its tail and it became a staff again.

Then Moses placed his hand within his shirt. When he withdrew it, the skin was white with leprosy. Again he placed his hand within his shirt, and the skin was healed.

Then Moses turned over a tureen of water and spilled it on the floor and it became blood, though before it was pure.

Pharaoh said, ‘These are three signs. You promised five.’

Moses said, ‘I am the fourth sign, and you are the fifth.’

Pharaoh said, ‘What riddle is this? Have you so few tricks?’

Moses said, ‘Like the white hand, I became impure. But when the Lord hid me away from you I became pure, for God leads aright whom He will. Like the water, you were pure. Upon you God conferred every advantage and looked after your every need and desire. Yet you are cast down now and made impure, for He leads astray whom He will.

A coward and a murderer left your court; a prophet of God has returned. He exerts over everything complete control and you are not allowed to question Him. He cast me down that He might raise me up. He raised you up that He could cast you down.

Over everything God has power and He has no associate with whom to share it, nor helpers to exert it, nor peers to approve it. He is all that is and there is nothing that is not His.

Ahmad says, *we will all return unto Him*, yet I wonder who among us has ever left? There is nothing we say that He did not hear before we spoke. There is nothing we do that is hidden from Him, even as we hide it from ourselves. There is nowhere you may stand that you are not beneath His shadow.’

Pharaoh said, ‘I have earned my station. Through my power I raised myself up over all Egyptians and became your master. You are a coward and a murderer and you are a fugitive from my justice. Yet you condemn me and call yourself prophet. This is madness.’

Moses said, ‘What God gives no man earns, nor can any man claim a portion of His bounty by right. Graciously He gives life and strength for time allotted. Justly, He deprives you of both.’”

Bahira mocked Iblis, saying, “You are faultless; you claim you are pure as God Himself while declaring ‘any impurity in me is His doing!’ Which is it? You talk of God’s unity, but you conceal yourself within it as though you were absolved by it. When you speak of unity, I hear only the word ‘equivalence.’ But you are

no extension of God, for He has no partners. The things of the world are not God, for God transcends these feeble worlds. In the Master's house, all things are his possessions; but He is not to be confused with what belongs to Him."

Stung by this, Iblis said, "Yet you would demand that I bow down to worship another than Him! You would have me crawl in the dust at the feet of the son of dust! What lover would seek to please his beloved by loving any other than Him?"

Bahira said, "It was His prerogative that you bow down before Adam! What lover would deny his beloved so small a favor?"

Iblis said, "Your Lord tests His servants."

Bahira said, "If you passed this test, why are you cursed, despised and deformed?"

Iblis answered, "To this test there is no end. Why do you imagine the matter concluded? Why can't you accept the end to which He purposed me? You say, 'all things are His possessions,' and that, 'He is not to be confused with what belongs to Him.' But when His sword touches your neck, would you beg mercy from the sword?

I will accept my faults and freely admit them. For 700,000 years among the angels my worship was best and I attained the paradise of His presence. But my worship was selfish. If a man wears a black coat and is spattered with blood at the slaughterhouse, it is nothing. If a man wears a white coat, a drop of blood from his nose is peril. I worshipped Him for my sake, for my delight at His pleasure. In the doorway to my salvation, I myself blocked the way. By His sanctity, I thought myself sanctified. By His purity, I thought myself purified. But the stain of my insolence, even measuring a thimbleful, corrupted me and He cast me out. He expelled me from the court of His nearness. Deprived of His beauty, my features became ugly. Deprived of His effulgence, my world became dark.

Deformity was not a condition of my curse, but merely a symptom of my separation. I could take on my original form, the

form in which I worshipped, but you could not bear the sight of it. You would die seeing Iblis at his prayers. His curse was my name. He stripped me of rank and called me *devil*.

Nothing is possible except by His leave. But the matter of features and names is a slight one. The changing of my name was not the sign of sin, but the sin itself—that I ever took a name as my possession apart from Him, as though I could exist apart from Him. But my fall was my redemption. Did I not declare thereafter that my revenge was by His leave alone? In my worship I blasphemed; in my insolence I was redeemed. To all creation I declared, 'There is no power nor strength but in God,' and I was reprieved from punishment.

The meaning of His unity, which perplexes even men such as you, is apparent; only through opposites do things become known. Thus, He cursed His most trusted angel and His curse was thus my blessing—that I might serve Him more selflessly by absence from Him. It is His test of me that I may be the first worthy of His presence. Before, I tasted the wine of His nearness because He is merciful and gracious. When I taste of it again, it will be because I am the only one worthy."

Bahira said, "You are a monster, cursed until the Last Day. How can you speak of your redemption when your name is a byword for all perversity and depravity? That He permits it in His creation does not mean He approves nor, God forbid, blesses it! Remember, *God never enjoins a conduct that is shameful*."

Iblis smiled and said, "You say the Lord enjoins nothing shameful? Therefore, what you call my disobedience cannot be shameful. Nothing is possible that He does not enjoin. That is the extent of His power. Didn't you say it yourself? If it were less, He would not be worthy of the name God. His dominion is complete. He is Lord not merely of what is good. What you call evil is well within His power. By His power He calls evil into existence.

He is the Author. What are we? Mere actors flitting briefly on His stage, mouthing the lines He penned for us in pre-eternity. In

the words you use to condemn me, 'He enjoins nothing shameful,' I hear the sweet song of my absolution, piped on the instruments of His unity.

Nothing is shameful to the initiated. The lover obeys the Beloved, whatever the outward appearance and regardless of the opinions of the rabble. So potent is His beauty that those who do not know that they love Him, still they obey Him and bend to His invisible hand.

He makes kings of devils and makes paupers of His saints. He punishes His prophets and tortures His devotees with the torments of Hell.

I am not the monster you make of me. Fix your anger on your Lord who has purposed me thus. Is your Lord not all-powerful? *Hath not the potter power over the clay to make one vessel unto honor and another unto dishonor?*

The Marcionites are right to call Him a slave driver, a taskmaster. After the Hebrews escaped from Egypt, they won no liberty. On the contrary, they became subject to the Pharaoh of Pharaohs. Did Egypt swallow up Korah and his sons? Did Egypt set up over the Hebrews incomprehensible laws? Did Egypt keep them wandering in the desert for forty years? How different is manna from the rations Pharaoh supplied? No wonder then that the Hebrews, exiled in the wilderness, longed for Egypt, to return to the land that welcomed Jacob and his sons and made Joseph a king of Egypt. They said, 'Better to be in Potiphar's service than in Pharaoh's prison!'

Remember Miriam, the sister of Moses, when she confronted her brother and accused him. God became angry for Moses' sake. God cursed Miriam and afflicted her with leprosy. Her skin turned snow-white and she was separated from her people. Moses, who loved his sister, prayed to God to forgive her. 'She has wronged me,' he said. 'But I am forgiving. Will You forgive?'

This savage One forgives nothing even as those who sin against Him do so at His bidding. This savage One, you Christians say,

gave His son to cleanse the world of sin. Are they blind? Men still sin and He still accuses them for it, though He affixed His son to a cross. The Marcionites are fools to deny that this was the doing of God the Father. They are afraid of the truth of the matter, that the God of love drowns us all, whether good or evil, in the blood of His lovers.

Look at the misery and suffering He has wrought in this world. Look at what that Monster has wrought for His amusement! If it is pure, He defiles it! If it is sweet, He makes it sour! If it has value, He makes it worthless! He is a clown and trickster, a liar and a madman! And His madness has made me madder still!"

Bahira said, "You are the one who assumes the matter concluded! You say He crucified His son and that He brings misery and suffering to the world, yet you forget the end to which He purposed all things, even misery and suffering! When I say 'You cause suffering,' you declare, 'Ah, but to a righteous end.' You take credit for that end. When you perceive no good end, You call God a monster! No finer testament is there to your own monstrosity. You have wronged Him and erred against Him."

Iblis said, "If I have erred, my error cannot harm Him. I cannot wrong Him, I can wrong only myself. But do not forget that His love is self-love. There is no room for your love for Him or for His love of you.

But again you accuse me and, in your accusation, you exonerate me. Judge fairly between us, between Him and me. He has the power to lead astray whom He will. I have no power, except that He has already decided. Why do you find in His foulness all is fair? And in my fairness, all is foul?

Consider me then, a suffering servant of that tyrant. I'll make no speeches of overthrowing His tyranny for I am an instrument of it. You, like the friends of Job, dare to revile me for imagined sins. Like that prophet, I am blameless, and like his friends, you slander me, too afraid to speak truth to the Lord."

When his anger subsided, Iblis fell upon his face, tearing at his hair, weeping blood into the dust. Bahira approached him, placed his hand upon the devil's shoulder, a great wounded bird, black and a carrion-eater, but with broken wings and worthy of pity.

Iblis said, "These reproaches are the stings of my passion. Surely He can withstand my criticism. Surely He will forgive this powerless one the transgression of love for Him…I lay last night with a beautiful houri. In the morning, she was gone. 'Beloved,' I whispered as we embraced. 'Whore!' I shouted in her absence. 'How many others must she favor over me? She entertains the unworthy while I sacrifice everything and am desolate without her.' If I did not love her, why would I care that she were gone?

Do not imagine that love for Him will set you free. No, it is a prison, a fortress from which you will never escape. Do not imagine that love has opened your eyes. No, it has veiled them and you grope foolishly in shadows. Yet it is a testament to love's power that it shall seem at times to set you free, though you be weighted down with shackles, and seem to open your eyes, though you be wholly blinded.

In love I am impertinent. The droplet is an ocean. A candle is an inferno. This love, a little, is sweet wine. More is absinthe and poison. How long I have vomited up my anger and my grief for love of Him. This is love, not contentment, not repose. I love whether He remembers me or forgets me, whether He rewards or refrains from reward. If I were blessed rather than cursed, how would you know my love to be genuine? Others love simply to be blessed. But for my love I was cursed and I will not renounce my love, and hence you know the value of my coin.

God commanded Abraham to take his son and offer him as a burnt offering.

So Abraham brought his son to the mountaintop and bound him to the altar and said to him, 'My child, the Lord has commanded me to sacrifice you.'

Isaac said, 'If you are insane, still my life belongs to you to take as you please. If this is God's will, then my life belongs doubly to Him, and He will take it as He pleases.'

Abraham said, 'Whether it is madness or God's will, it is God's will nevertheless.' And weeping over his son, he put the knife to his throat.'"

Bahira answered, "But the Angel of God said to Abraham, 'What of His promise to you that He will make you the father of a nation through this boy?'

Abraham said, 'Am I the judge of my Lord? I am merely a man and have no resort to the truth except through Him. To whom else shall I turn for fulfillment of His promise? I seek refuge in God from God.'

The Angel said, 'It is well within His power that you might sacrifice your son a thousand times, yet still He will fulfill His promise to you.'

God spared Isaac. Though Abraham did not believe God wished him to kill his son, still he was ready to obey the outward command, for all things are possible through Him.

The Lord created Adam as His mirror. By breathing His spirit into Adam, He then tested you through him. He said, 'Bow to Adam.' But you said, 'To no other than You!' as though you were faithful in your disobedience. And when you examined Adam, you could not see your Lord. Shortsighted, you saw only the mirror; you were blind to the beauty of His face reflected therein. Did you not love God enough to trust Him a little? You claim to fathom the hidden will of God, yet could not even see Him in His own creation!

You perceived only the mirror and vaunted yourself over it. How could you ignore the image it reflected? He did not ask you to bow before Adam for Adam's sake, but that through you He might reveal the meaning of divine union. Before you could learn the truth of His unity, you became the riddle of it. You were the riddle of Unity, and I have solved you.

Now I understand. Ahmad led me to you not so that you would instruct me in Divine Unity, but because you are the puzzle of it. I have cut the knot of your mystery and can answer your lies.

Before Balamah became queen, a young man of noble birth became infatuated with her. His heart was her captive and not a moment passed that his thoughts did not dwell on her. During the day he was distracted by dreams of her; at night his restless soul found no peace, for the vision of her blazed sun-like through the eyes of his heart. The women of her father's court were mere stars in the heaven of her beauty; less than stars, for she bathed all the worlds in effulgence. Even the enemies of the king agreed with one another on the loveliness of his daughter. And matching her outer beauty were her inner merits—her habits were chaste; her demeanor kind; her heart virtuous.

Since the young nobleman laid eyes on this girl, his lovesickness became daily more apparent to all who knew him. Each day he grew more pale, more weak while his desire for her went unabated, but grew in her absence. His friends did nothing, for he had sworn them to secrecy as to the cause of his affliction. But at last, a true friend, weighing in the balance his friend's secret and his friend's life, divulged the secret to the king's daughter. She called the lovesick youth before her, confronting him with her knowledge.

She said, 'Do you know how many men have laid the claim of love for me? I have tested them all, and they are all found wanting. Escape with your life, at least. Do not persist in this. Renounce your love.'

He said, 'Say what you like; I am your slave.'

She said, 'Another slave for me? I do not need the service of one who is inconstant and disobedient and who ignorantly professes a thing he does not understand. Do not persist in this.'

He answered, 'I am helpless. The choice was not mine; though had I been given such a choice, I should still have chosen you. Ask what you will of me. Test me to your satisfaction and you will find the coin of my love is not false.'

She sent him away and for weeks she had no contact with him. But at last she sent a girl to him dressed in tatters and dirty with black earth. This girl delivered to the youth a message in the handwriting of his beloved and sealed with her royal seal. 'If your love for me is true, take this girl into your bed, for if you love me, she will love you.'

The youth became angry at this, declaring, 'How can I lie with this girl? My beloved could not mean what she has written. It is madness. This is her test of me—she commands me to lie with this girl to prove that I do not love her sufficiently to restrain myself. But this is no test for me. This girl is repugnant to me, impoverished and filthy.'

When he turned the girl away, immediately two soldiers grabbed hold of him, and the girl wiped the dirt from her face, revealing herself to him as the object of his desire. At once he regretted what he said.

She said, 'In this test I discovered you as you really are. If you had loved me for my sake, you would have obeyed my message. But you loved me for yourself and thus failed to recognize me in any form but what your idle fancies and vain imaginings permitted. There is no sin in sleeping with one as I command; rather you are obliged to do so, but your arrogance and the pride of your intellect prevented you.'

Iblis, you threw off the chains of obedience and called your refusal 'obedience.' You renounce your love and call your renunciation 'love.'

You mock and misuse the meaning of His unity. You call yourself *monotheist* while making yourself His partner. You call yourself His instrument of wrath, as though you, Iblis, were indispensable to Him. You clothe yourself in scraps of truth to conceal the greater truth. He is more powerful than you imagine. You say He could not achieve His ends, except that you 'accepted' the mantle of curse. He is well exalted over your ability to help or harm Him!"

Iblis smirked at this, “You don’t know anything. What He has taught you of me is myth and shadow. Look at your resemblance to me.

I have hidden this truth from you; I have veiled mankind from this my secret with Him; this secret is my intimacy with Him.

‘I was made before he was made!’ I said. But I did not mean ‘I am superior to him.’ If you but knew. Let me reveal Our secret to you: He made man not in His image, but in mine. He said to me, ‘War with him, that you might purge from yourself what he represents in you.’ From the moment Adam was made, after the Lord breathed into him the essence of my sins, He commanded that I bow. He commanded this to spare me from the truth that you are my bad conscience fashioned from the rib of my pride. I did not bow, but peered into Adam and shuddered, for I found my own sins there enshrined.

If I had bowed to his graven image of me, I would remain veiled. But I did not bow; I drew my sword against you—He made my sins manifest in you! All creation is His test of me! You are bit players in my passion. I am not what man must overcome; man is what I must overcome! You are my enemy. You are the ashes of my fire—God drew you out; made my errors manifest in ash and dust. And when the earth is rid of you all, I will wring your blood from the shirt of hatred. On the Last Day, when my respite has ended, when I have exterminated your kind from all the worlds, when I am purified, then He will restore me to my place with Him.”

Iblis’ wings unfurled behind him, the starlight winking out as they overcrowded the sky. Bahira fell back in horror at the sight of Iblis. The devil’s black jaw jutted obscenely forward, revealing a row of sharp and bloody teeth.

Iblis said, “I have drawn my sword against you. I have sworn myself to your eradication. You are vermin; you are misfortune. My war with you is holy war.”

Bahira fell back, but found his voice. “Liar! All lies! You will say anything to justify your cruelty and ignorance...but all is

rationalization. You have acted this way and, when the mirror is handed to you, you say, 'You made me ugly!' You have never acknowledged your disobedience and you blame others than yourself for your punishment!

The consumptive is not an ascetic. Lack of appetite is not righteous fasting. Stolen goods are not charity, nor are taxes philanthropy. As to this new story, I wonder how you can keep your lies straight. Each argument by itself is a pearl of rhetoric and reason. But strung together they look foolish and gaudy. For every argument you make, you have made ten others that absolutely contradict it. But this last story is a masterpiece of lies. You have outdone even the Marcionites.

Where do I begin to argue with you? Do I ask why God would fashion His prophets from the manifestation of your evil? Do I ask how the mere ashes of your fire have enough power to overcome the fire itself? Do I ask how God could be complicit in your lies to mankind? Or why He should lie to us about your nature and our own? Or why you should choose to protect this secret? Do I ask how this secret between yourself and your Creator need be divulged to vermin? Do I ask how your war against pride has made you so proud?"

Iblis' state became calm and he folded his wings and sat by the river and laughed. He laughed hard and made no attempt to conceal it. And, for a moment, Bahira glimpsed a little of Iblis' former beauty, and felt suddenly heartbroken that God should fashion such a beautiful creature, only to cast it down.

"O Bahira, you have burned me! But listen to me a little longer, though my seductions of you have failed. Listen a moment.

You are easy sport for me. Heap dung into jewel bags and men will pay by weight. How easy you are to deceive, for you so desperately want to be deceived. If I have failed to fool you today, Bahira, it is because I have not told you what you wanted to hear. If I had, you would have fallen down to worship me.

How easy you are to deceive. And were I not the Deceiver, you would with no less skill deceive yourselves. You love according to the least appearance. If I slip a sack of skin over entrails, dervishes swoon, ascetics forsake their vows, teachers abuse their charges—all for the sake of bones and intestines.

Look behind that thin veil and see what you love—what you would live and die for! Look beyond me, for I am the world, I am God's veil. Do not obsess over me, for I am but one appearance of Him whose appearances outnumber the stars in the celestial sphere, whose attributes outnumber every grain of sand in all His worlds.

Do not hate me, nor the world for that matter. But do not disregard me. Know the truth of me and be at peace with me, for He will protect you if you warrant His protection. If you do not, you belong to me.

Do not think that I lead men to damnation. I do not buy souls. Why should I purchase what is so freely given to me every day in such surplus? I need adherents like a drowning man needs a cup of water.

If I have done as you say and if I am guilty for my pride, still I am the least of sinners. Adam too forgot his Lord and he too was cast from paradise. Yet he found forgiveness and mercy at His hands. Where is my portion?

Bahira, understand this much at least: After the word of God came to him, Jonah fled to Joppa. He bought passage on a ship to Tarshish. The ship set sail and God sent a terrible storm. The sailors were afraid for their lives and prayed for deliverance. While Jonah slept below deck, the sailors cast their wares into the sea, to lighten the ship to keep it from sinking.

The captain found Jonah and woke him, saying 'Rise up, sleeper, and pray to your God that He might save us.' And the sailors cast lots with Jonah and discerned that the storm was on his account.

Jonah said, ‘God is angry with me; I disobeyed His command and fled from Him.’

The sailors said, ‘How will we appease Him and escape with our lives?’

Jonah said, ‘Cast me into the churning sea and it will become calm for you.’

The sailors said, ‘We will not have your blood on our hands.’

Jonah said, ‘You are not murderers. You are instruments of God’s wrath against me. When you throw me into the water, you will be delivered.’

And when they cast him into the waters, the sea became calm, just as Jonah promised. And when Jonah sank beneath the waves, God sent a fish that swallowed him whole. And in the darkness, unable to move, Jonah declared, ‘I have fled from Him and am cast out of His presence. Yet He hears me cry out at my affliction. And though I am cursed and condemned, He will rescue me and I will deliver His message according to His command, for I can do nothing except obey, even when I disobey.’

My lament is not a riddle for children, but it is sincere even if I am conquered in my sincerity. And if it is insincere, it is shame, not pride, that makes me a liar. Still, I have said enough that was true that even His prophets are tempted by my words to question God. Yet you have overcome me, and thus have overcome the fallacy of opposites and the mystery of union.

I am condemned until the end of time, yet I will not bow. Whether I accepted the mantle of curse or whether it was thrust upon me for my transgressions, still I choose to bear it, for even in opposition to Him, He has me in His service.

I am condemned, but I have hope. I cannot make obeisance to Him, for I am ashamed before Him.

In the presence of the All-Merciful, it is impiety to despair of His mercy. Perhaps you will pray on my behalf and plead my case, however unworthy, in His court. Remember me, Bahira, as Moses remembered Miriam.”

v.

Bahira left Iblis and returned to the city, where dawn was now softly glowing. Muhammad met him at the gates of Busra. Bahira opened his mouth to speak to him, but Muhammad said, “Do not plead his case; he has been heard and 700,000 times since the first time. His concern is God’s concern, not yours; and you are not permitted to question Him. Do not risk the curse that Iblis brought upon himself by bowing to Iblis before bowing to God. Remember Iblis’ place. Even with tears in his eyes and a burning heart, he fulfills the promise he made to God: ‘I will lead them all astray, barring only those You protect.’ *Do not take the road that is not your road.*

God is All-Powerful. You submit to Him though you may not know it. It is better to submit with a little understanding than in ignorance. Submission to His complete power requires that you accept that His doings are not subject to your comprehension; comprehend only this and you are among the wise. Comprehend all else yet fail to understand this, and you are Iblis.

After Jonah prophesied the destruction of Nineveh, he left the city and climbed a hill to the east. God caused a bush to grow nearby. In the shade of the bush, Jonah waited expectantly for God to destroy Nineveh, as he had promised. But because the people of the city had repented of their sins and had heeded Jonah’s message, God spared the city and forgave the wicked. The promised destruction did not come.

Jonah said, ‘I prophesy a day of doom for them; yet You spare them. You have made a fool and a false prophet of me! They commit wickedness and You spare them. Do you wonder why, when You call, I run away?’

In the morning, the bush that had shaded Jonah was withered, and the sun beat down on him. He said, ‘Why did He destroy the tree?’

The Angel of God said, ‘*To Him belongs the power to punish without reason and to be angered at the best of achievements.* To

Him belong the reasons and He is, in everything, just. That you are ignorant of the reasons does not make Him unfair. In His hand is peril and prosperity. He is not questioned as to His doings, but you are questioned.

Why would He bring a messenger to Nineveh, except that he is the promise of their deliverance? He holds out wrath and mercy; He has appointed both to do His bidding.

If there were not free will, if men could not alter their fate, why would He appoint mercy? Why would He send you to them if His course were unalterable? If He should destroy the wicked where they stand, not a single one of you would be left alive.

Yet you care nothing for your kind; when they are righteous you forget them, when they are wicked you say, *Why did You spare them?* Likewise, when the bush grows, you do not speak of it. When He strikes it down, you say *Why did You destroy it?* That He let it grow was a mercy to you. That He destroyed it was His reminder to you, just as you went among the people of Nineveh. They repented for your message, thus they live. Learn something of repentance from them.'"

Muhammad said, "Iblis and I are proof of God's power over His creatures and likewise proof of their freedom.

You were so easily troubled by the errors of the Marcionites. Examine their claims more closely; how easily they unravel! Remember what he said, 'There is God the Father and against Him is the Demiurge; but God will prevail.' Yet God the Father, according to the Marcionites, was the primal word, the Logos from which all else sprung. Your difficulties were never solved by the Marcionites, even had you accepted their heresies. You yourself defeated the argument, yet you did not know it. 'If God were not all-powerful, he would not be worthy of the name God.' And for these words, He smiled on you and delivered you from error. Remember in your heart what the Marcionite said to you."

The Marcionite youth stood before him as before. He said, "If there is one God and God the Father and Yahweh are the same,

then God is insane. How shall you explain His madness? You must renounce your monotheism; turn away from the whisperings of the Demiurge! And when you have done this, the door to divine knowledge will open to you; that is why the priests and the bishops renounce us and tell you not to speak with us. For if we open your eyes, who will tithe to them? Who will pay for their cathedrals and banquets and mistresses? You Christian priests are truly priests of the Demiurge like the Hebrews before you. You foist upon the world such unbelievable fictions!"

The Marcionite cast down at Bahira's feet the torn pieces of a Torah. Bahira knelt and gathered the pieces and spoke over them the hidden name of God. And the Torah was restored in Bahira's hands. The youth cried out, "What have you done?"

Bahira said, "It is true. The words you recited. *For there is no good tree that produces corrupt fruit; nor corrupt tree that produces good fruit. For each tree is known by its own fruit.* But should you judge your Lord, Whom you can neither believe nor understand, with words by which men are to be judged? Yet even so, is God the Father not to be judged by these words that you use to cast down God the Creator? God is not judged; nor are the standards by which men are judged to be applied to Him. You are forbidden to kill, but each day untold thousands die at His command. Would you call Him a murderer? When you purchase gold, do you inquire as to its ripeness? When you choose wine, do you weigh it? This is the beginning of your error; you apply these standards to God as Creator, but not to God as the First Principle. You judge Him according to His creation but have not the honesty to judge Him according to the measure of His power. Where did your Demiurge come from? Was he self-created?"

The youth said, "He was formed after the First Principle."

Bahira said, "But isn't the Demiurge equal with God the Father?"

The youth said, "No! The Demiurge came after God the Father, and is inferior to Him."

Bahira said, “God the Father is All-Powerful?”

The youth replied, “Yes.”

Bahira said, “Therefore, the Demiurge is subject to the power of God the Father. Your faith does not answer my questions. You come to me spewing this nonsense you take as religion. You say to me, ‘Your one god contradicts himself, for he allows anger and evil. Your one god is therefore a lesser god, for the God of Love created him; and the Demiurge, in his perversity, created evil.’ Yet by your reasoning, God the Father remains guilty of the crimes you ascribe to the Demiurge, for the Demiurge himself is a creature of and subject to God the Father. Your theology is heresy. If you claim that the ‘god’ of creation is evil, then God the Father is an accomplice to that evil.”

The youth said, “But God the Father cannot be responsible for evil in the world.”

Bahira said, “What you call evil is a lack of perception. *It is within His power to punish without reason and to be angry at the best of accomplishments.* To Him belong the reasons and He is, in everything, just. He is not bound by our ignorance. If you accept that He is powerful over all things, then you must also accept that His doings are not subject to the laws of human comprehension. All things are revealed to men in accordance with man’s capacity to comprehend, not in accordance with the truth of His state. Yet you fill a thimble with saltwater and say, ‘Behold, the ocean.’

Return to the Marcionites who have sent you. Tell them what I have said, and perhaps they will repent and worship God.”

The youth said, “You have burned me twice, Bahira. But I cannot convert the Marcionites; they will mistake me for the Demiurge.

To some the white hand of truth is but leprosy and no proof at all. But to others, the white hand replaces the truth it represents.

But do not say, as you said before, that I am forever cursed. I am damned. Yet I have hope of His forgiveness and I do not

despair of His love. The door of His mercy is not closed on me, nor does my trial know any end. This is a shameful thing that you believe…to think like the Israelites who declared before you that in any matter His hands are bound. You imagine that justice governs Him. In truth, justice is His subject and only through Him is justice known. He is the Judge of what is just, and you are not asked. Therefore, do not judge His actions according to your feeble notions of justice. Rather, judge your notions of justice by His actions. His law is not His master; no, His law serves Him and only by serving Him is it worthy to be obeyed.

And remember my words. *Though I have fallen, I will rise. Though I sit in darkness, the Lord will be my light.*"

Muhammad said, "Wake up from this, Bahira. He has left a single word of doubt in you. Ask me for this final favor, and I will grant it to you."

Bahira said, "Iblis has sinned against God and was cast out of paradise for it. I would not question the justice of this. Adam too was cast out. Yet He has forgiven Adam while Iblis still bears His curse. Iblis asked for his portion of mercy. Surely God will grant it."

Muhammad said, "The sin of pride does not bar Iblis from His presence. It is that Iblis blamed Him for his pride. Consider when Moses left his people to commune with his Lord atop the mountain. For days, the children of Israel waited; but their patience was short. Sameri agreed with those who said, 'Moses will not return. He has abandoned us or has died, punished by God. But we must keep faith with Him who rescued us from bondage.' Therefore, Aaron and Sameri fashioned a calf from gold and said, 'Look! This is the god who brought us out of bondage!' And the children of Israel worshipped the idol.

When Moses returned, he said to Aaron, 'What have you done? This calf is an idol, fit for burning, not for worship!'

Aaron fell on his knees and begged forgiveness, offering no excuse.

When Moses asked Sameri, Sameri whispered to him, 'It is not as it appears, Moses. After you had gone, Aaron fashioned the idol, but I cast upon it the dust from your tracks. Thus I kept faith with you and honored you, even as your own brother went astray.'

Moses said, 'You are cursed and cast out. He who disobeys my outward command is not my friend!'

Sameri said, 'What of Aaron? He also disobeyed! Your punishment of me must also fall on him.'

Moses said, 'He erred and admitted his error. You erred and made excuses and called yourself faithful. You are not my friend, whatever you profess!'

When God asked of Adam his excuse, Adam offered nothing but his regret. Iblis has not repented. Everything he has said to you has been denial and blame."

Muhammad said, "I have revealed all this to you before, and though you heard, you did not understand. Iblis is the stone in your hand, the idol of doubt to which men cling even as they enter the court of His presence. Whether you cast it down or grasp it tightly, by it you will know whether you have been faithful."

vi.

By His power, God could lead all men aright. Yet so too could He lead them astray. The reasons are His, and you are not asked. But that you might know Him as He should be known, you contend among yourselves and within yourselves. He sets over you His outward command, which men choose to obey or to put aside. And those who obey are the best of His creation. And those who disobey are the least of it.

Iblis put aside the outward command and was cursed and cast down. His truth is half-truth. He is blind to his error and condemned to his fate. Iblis is in the likeness of the Jews who rejected Jesus, for Jesus was the outward command. Iblis is in the likeness of the Christians who rejected Muhammad, for Ahmad

was the outward command. Beware, O Muslims, lest you abjure the command as Iblis abjured it before you, lest your nearness to His throne become the cause of pride and blindness. O concourse of believers, repent and open your eyes to the Sun of Glory risen in your midst, if you but looked.

When Balamah left Jerusalem, taking Solomon's faith and his son with her, Solomon was distraught. For days he shut himself in darkness, pouring dust over his head and mourning Balamah's departure as though it were her death.

Before she left, Balamah entrusted to the Hoopoe a single gift for her beloved king. And when Solomon received this gift from the Hoopoe, the king of Israel could not bring himself to open it, and the package remained untouched.

After some time, however, Solomon opened the package and found in it a glass vial filled with liquid. Again, he could not bring himself to unseal the vial and, for months, he cherished it, not touching it.

At last, Solomon unsealed the vial and discovered it was her perfume. Its fragrance filled his room with the scent of her, as though she stood before him.

Learn of your journey a little from Solomon. Do not allow your remembrance to be the cause of your complacency. Your discoveries are His gift to you. But when the gift is revealed, the gift itself is not the goal.

In parting, remembrances are sweet. In union, they are distractions. Turn in the direction of the Sheba of His good pleasure. Do not mistake the map for the destination. That you circumambulate a stone from the path around the Kaaba is not to be called *pilgrimage*.

My tale is done. It is sufficient. If on your tongue a single word of this discourse is sweet, recite for me a prayer that His glance might fall on me. My tale is done. I may not live to offer any better contrition—it is in His hands.

# 3

# THE MEN WHO HAVE THE ELEPHANT

i.

*I drink too much; this wine, like Noah's flood,*
*Is drowning me, is thirsty for my blood.*

I awoke with the words of Iblis sounding in my ears. "I am as God made me. Had I bowed to Adam, I would have remained chief of the angels, closest to His throne. I would have called to Abraham to spare Isaac; I would have saved Hagar in the wilderness; I would have announced to Zechariah the birth of John, and to Mary the birth of Jesus; I would have revealed the word of God to Muhammad. All of this was mine for the price of a bow. For a single bow I was cast out and am furthest from His throne!"

Like His form and figure, His reasons are impenetrable to human minds. Say nothing more of Him than that and you have approached nearest to the truth of His state. What did Moses ask of Him? "Let me see You; my soul will be put at ease to see You and my doubts allayed to rest eyes on You." The Angel of God told him, "You will not bear it. But if you look at the mountain beside you, He will reveal a portion of His beauty to it alone. If the mountain remains standing, then you can look upon Him." Moses set his eyes on the mountain and, when God revealed Himself, the mountain crumbled. Moses fell down and said, "Forgive me." The Angel of God said, "If He had revealed any but the least portion of His beauty, the world would have crumbled like the mountain and all those living in the world would cease ever to have been."

Do not take the likeness of your minds, your passions, your reasons, and say that these apply to Him—that He also possesses a mind like yours, and passions like yours, and that His reasons are like yours. This is backward. Instead, your mind, your passions, your reasons are tokens of His existence and His existence is proof of you. Take yourself as a token of Him. Within you are His signs made living. The moment of insight that comes unbidden—this is a sign of Him.

You are my dearest friends. The forests and fields you paint draw blood from this living heart. Who would credit the brush? The music you perform sets free the bird of my soul. Who would adore the instrument? The verses you write put fire to my spirit. Who would praise the pen? The light of your reason scatters the darkness tormenting me. In each of you, I have found trace enough of Him; for these are the signs issuing from you, just as the worlds issued from Him.

His nature is ineffable even by analogy. Yet the prophets taught analogies. Men took them as the literal truth or as lies. They were neither. By His measure, what do we know of truth or falsehood? Do not plumb these depths too much. Instead, let yourself become the analogy; this is all that links you to Him. He was a hidden treasure wishing to be known; fill your heart with the coin of His realm and you will find Him.

Today I saw the moon on the first day of Ramadan. It is a splinter in the heavens. It is a ship wrecked on the shores of twilight, taking water, sinking among red and golden rocks. It is the eyelash of the houri. It is the sword of Ahmad. It is Christ's last wound.

You have heard the nightingale's song and you have learned to sing. Do you know with what joy he sings, or with what sorrow? Or do you sound the notes without understanding their meaning? If you have learned to recite the Quran in Arabic, but do not understand Arabic, the sound of that sublime recitation is noise without meaning. The prayer of the one who prays in the language he knows is superior to mimicry.

Iblis was a fine speaker—and was the first to reason by analogy. He compared himself to Adam and reasoned, "I am fire; and he is dust!" How far, by this analogy, he fell; he is falling even still. Moses was a stutterer. He said, "Let Aaron speak on my behalf. He will reveal to the people what You have revealed to me." He did not say, "Aaron shall reveal my will as I reveal Yours; he shall be me as I am You." Moses said in himself, "In that analogy there is truth but Israel would not understand."

Analogy is a compass for the lost. When you have come to your destination, put it aside. Some questions it cannot answer. Standing beneath Polaris, no direction is north. He commands us, and we must obey. He has revealed a little of Himself by analogy that we may glimpse His beauty. With analogy He may draw you near; yet if you see His Face, and do not obey His command, you are lost. If you would be counted among the believers, heed the command first and worry about the analogy after. Be careful with the sword that cuts by what is similar, sharpened by what is familiar, or you will open your throat on it. Analogy does not tell you what He requires of you. Why do you dive in these dangerous waters when the treasure has been raised? Why do you seek a key when the door is open to you? Why do you seek guidance from any except Him?

ii.

Remember the story of Balaam, that prophet who rejected Him for Whom the worlds have issued; that seer who delighted only in the sight of his own imaginings; that seeker who sought nothing so assiduously as his own fleeting pleasure. Though Iblis is abased as the one whom God rejected, Balaam's abasement is greater still—for he rejected God. The words are not less true for the ignorance of the speaker of the words. Though his call to prayer is valid, Balaam was a muezzin in the tower of hypocrisy.

On the day before he was put to death by the Israelites, Balaam dreamed a dream and saw a houri of God in Paradise. He saw her in the King's courtyard, listening to the musicians that played for His pleasure. She stood beside a pillar, her gown ghostly white in the early evening twilight, the wind playing in its folds. She did not return his gaze. Her eyes were fixed on the cypresses that grew in the center of the courtyard. Her attention did not waver; she stared intently, as though deep in meditation at the qiblah of these three trees.

When Balaam drew up beside her, she turned her face, her eyes following a little behind. And for a moment she gazed on

him. He marveled at her beauty and blood ran from his eyes. Had Joseph seen this daughter of paradise, he would have cut his hand in amazement and would have begrudged no man love for her. Her black tresses hung down over her shoulders, dripping with musk and sweet perfume. Her forehead was alabaster white; her eyebrows arched like bows set down above the arrows of her eyes. Those spring green eyes struck Balaam dumb. He blanched with fear; he trembled at the sight of her. She opened her mouth, her carnelian lips parting and she spoke to him.

She said, "I know you, dreamer. I've seen you from my bedchamber wandering the streets of the King's city, lost or drunk. Now you have stumbled into His courtyard. Where are the guards to keep you out? Where are His soldiers to expel you?"

Balaam said, "The King would be right to throw me out of His courtyard, out of His city, and out of the lands that bear allegiance to Him. But where would I rest if He exiled me? Where would I find peace or solace?"

She said, "You talk as though you are in His service. You are a drunk and a wanderer. You've shown no allegiance to Him; no, you have turned away from Him. He knows you are here; He has known for some time. He asked the people to open their shops for you, their homes for you, but you have rejected every invitation. You have turned your back on all those who would happily take you in and give you peace or solace. Now you come here, and you loiter in His courtyard."

Balaam said, "I don't recall that any man has opened a door for me. I have found doors open, and have eaten from others' stores. I am not a guest, but a thief."

She said, "You pretend piety and regret. He has informed me of your state. You steal even now a little from His pantry, and you are still ungrateful. But the King has withheld His wrath. Perhaps He imagines one day you will know something real of piety and regret. But even this promise sounds to you like a respite from punishment. You find in it an excuse to pursue your drunken

whims and your vile excesses. My heart shudders at the thought of what you have done; but He has asked me to tell you something."

Balaam said, "If I offend you, let Him tell me."

She said, "He speaks only to His close servants. He has promised not to speak to mortal men for an allotted time; He has never uttered a word that men haven't twisted to serve their vices. He will speak a little to me and to those long in His service. How can you, who have never served Him, not even for a moment, demand from Him an audience?"

Balaam said, "Is your abuse His message?"

She said, "Are you still asleep? Will you ever wake? No one has persecuted you. No one has put you out. He has watched over you and kept you safe from harm. If I train a dog, and feed him, love and care after him, and he bites me, I should blame the dog."

Balaam said, "His disapproval is a beating to me. When I hear Him calling, I run from Him. His love and His mercy make me ashamed. He put that feeling in my heart, to keep me away from Him, to wander these streets and wait to prepare myself for the day when my shame will not keep me from His presence."

She said, "You should be ashamed." She reached out her arms to Balaam and took his face in her hands. "Even so, He loves you and I love you. You say We reject you, but you reject Us, and We are the ones who wait."

Balaam could barely speak; his voice was choked. He whispered, "What is His message?"

She kissed his face, and the ink of this pen went dry.

iii.

*This foolish heart won't know the way to feel,*
*When He is near, and nothing else is real.*

When the Israelites were at his door, Balaam cried out, "In this desert I have faltered and denounced God. Venomous snakes have poisoned me. Where is Moses' standard? Let me look on it for a moment and perhaps I will live."

Balaam's donkey saw the Angel of God and turned aside, though Balaam struck her three times. When God opened Balaam's eyes, he cried out in anguish and fell on his knees and pressed his face to dry earth, watering its furrows with tears. He saw the Angel of God, shining like the sun and holding a sword in arms of bronze. The Angel of God said, "If your donkey had carried you to me, I would have struck off your head. This animal spared your life, and you repay her with angry blows."

Balaam said, "There are meanings in this for me to unlock."

The Angel of God said, "Better for you to repent, than to exercise your wit."

Balaam said, "God has given me insight and opened my eyes on the road to Moab. He armed me with wisdom and spared my life. I am His prophet."

The Angel of God said, "You are a seer. God has no prophet with an uncircumcised heart."

Balaam protested, "God speaks to me and through me. He blesses and curses whom He will."

The Angel of God said, "This is also true of Iblis."

The king of Moab asked Balaam to curse Israel. Balaam went to a bare hill and God came to him and put His words into Balaam's mouth. Four times Balaam spoke God's words and was filled with the spirit of God. But no more. When the Israelites conquered Moab, they put Balaam to the sword. Though he spoke the true word of God, he disobeyed God and was destroyed for it.

When Balaam locked himself away waiting for the Israelites to come to put him to death, the houri appeared again to him as in his dream.

The houri said, "Now that your time comes, you swear oaths and make promises to God if He will spare you. And for what? To live as you have always lived? You are lost in the wilderness of desire. No, not lost, for desire is your sole creed; the satisfaction of your passions is your single goal. You claim that you cannot

approach His throne in service to Him; that your shame prevents you. Yet this is still possible; while your search to quench the thirst of desire is futile. Be content with your place with Him, for that place is exalted. Kings die and tomorrow others hold the keys to their treasures. But your dominion with Him is imperishable. In His service, you are not deprived, not for an instant. Wake up from this dream of yourself."

He said, "If I shake off this drowsiness I might see what I have wrought in heedless sleep. I have anointed my heart with the oil of shame. My arms, my hands recoil in horror at what I have bidden them to do.

I may hide my secrets from men, but how will I conceal them from God? Who am I to speak a single word to advance His cause? I have no right to speak. I should cut out my tongue before it defiles His name again.

The devil worshipped God for 700,000 years. With every prayer, God set a star in the heavens. Still, Iblis was cast out for a single error. My transgressions outnumber his prayers. How can I expect to be admitted to God's court? Or accepted in His presence? What am I to Him? Whether accepted or rejected, I am nothing."

The houri said "Why do you ask, as ransom against your belief, that you comprehend? God does not need your belief. It is you who need it. Yet you demand from Him a prize for accepting what He freely offers. You have asked the doctor to cure you and have demanded from him payment for effecting a cure."

Balaam said, "It is too late for my repentance. The recitation is written on paper, purest white with passages embroidered in gold. My words are scratches in dust. Judge between these two.

What excuse will I bring before Him? There are no sufficient excuses. He disposes as He will and I am not asked."

The houri said, "Love for Him is His test of you. You might prefer the punishment visited on the sons of Qusayy, but the choice is not yours. Remember the men who had the elephant."

iv.

By a journey of great distance over inhospitable terrain, you might come to Bakka. The city, with its central shrine, is dusty and hot.

In distant memory it was a bare settlement of semi-nomads in a desolate valley. Bakka supplied water for those forgotten men to drink, but nothing for cultivation.

Still, its meager supply of water was enough. The nomads that moved in the surrounding desert traded in Bakka and worshipped there. A few tribes even settled there. Peoples had come and gone, had taken possession and lost possession of the valley. Qusayy and his sons settled there. For a little while they were masters of the valley; they took control of the water and looked after the ancient shrine that stood at the center of their settlement.

Men told ancient stories of Bakka. Adam built the first temple to God there. Abraham and Ishmael unearthed it. They rebuilt the temple on its ancient foundation. But these stories, first told by sparse settlements of Hebrews in the desert, later adopted by pagan Arabs, never reached the ears of the kings and emperors of prosperous far-away lands. Sana in Yemen was a long journey to the south; Constantinople was a longer journey north. But those were shining cities of conspicuous glory. Bakka flickered dimly in an empty desert.

In the intervening centuries, the temple, which the Hebrew patriarch had rebuilt, crumbled from neglect. And the religion of Abraham degenerated into disconnected stories while the shrine housed stone idols to Hubal and al-Lat and al-Uzza and Manat, and a hundred other lesser deities. Still, the house belonged to God, and His prophet Abraham. But from uniqueness and unity, God was demoted to be the keeper of this harem of godlings, powerless stones that men associated with His power.

The shrine was small, enclosed on four sides but without a roof. Within the shrine, the people of Bakka set up pictures and idols and arrows for divination. Qusayy built a low wall around the shrine. The space between this wall and the entrance to the shrine

was called the Hijr. In Qusayy's time, they sacrificed to their idols there. In intervening generations, the Hijr became nearly as sacred as the interior of the shrine. The people prayed there, and some slept there. In the Hijr, God granted men dreams and visions. One such dreamer was Abd al-Muttalib, a great-grandson of Qusayy. Al-Muttalib, who was called Shayba, lived in the city of Bakka and was, at the end of his life, its chief citizen and the leader of his tribe. But before he rose to prominence, Shayba spent his time looking after the shrine as his fathers had done before him. He slept in the Hijr and dreamed odd dreams in the shadow of the House of God. He dreamed of Abraham and Ishmael; he dreamed of the building of the House; and he dreamed of a forgotten well.

In the dream Sarah demanded that Abraham exile Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham said to God, "You have given me Isaac, but Ishmael is also my son." The Angel of God said to Abraham, "You must sacrifice Ishmael for Sarah's sake; I will show you where to take the boy and his mother." So Abraham brought Hagar and Ishmael to this desolate valley. He left them near thorn trees at the foundation of the House that Adam had first constructed to worship God. Now this was before Abraham and Ishmael rebuilt the sanctuary; at this time, Ishmael was still a boy. Abraham spoke quietly with Ishmael, kissed his forehead and embraced Hagar, invoking God's hidden name over them both.

After Abraham had left, Ishmael became thirsty. Hagar left him to find water, but she found nothing to offer her son to drink. Crying, she returned to Ishmael where she had left him, and found her son drinking water from a stream that sprang up from beneath his hand.

Hagar said, "How did you find this water?"

Ishmael said, "After I asked you for water, you left me. So I asked God. Before he left us, my father taught me a single prayer to pray. He said, 'Ask from the Provider, and what you ask He will provide.' He said, 'Pray this prayer. Say: "Here we are, O Lord. Here we are. You have no partner; and You have dominion over

us and whatever we possess." And when I prayed, this stream appeared from underground.'

Hagar was amazed and thought the water to be sacred. She took some in her water skin to keep for Ishmael. But when she did this, the water ceased to flow to the surface. She and Ishmael dug a well to reach the water again. Ishmael said to his mother, "If you had trusted God's providence, the stream would have flowed until the Last Day."

Three times Shayba dreamed this dream. In the third dream, an angel appeared to Shayba and instructed him to dig the well again at a specific spot nearby, for those still alive had forgotten it existed; it had been covered over generations before. Shayba asked the angel for his name, but the angel said, "I am a servant of God." And Shayba said, "You are Hubal."

At the end of the third dream, Shayba got up from the Hijr and took a small shovel and dug where the angel had told him. His oldest son, Harith, helped him dig. The people thought them ridiculous until Shayba struck the rim of the well. When he showed the masonry to them and at last struck water, Shayba's stature grew in their eyes. He drank from the well, saying "This is God's doing;" and went into the shrine with his son. There he knelt before an idol of Hubal that was carved from red agate and made in the shape of a man. As he looked upon the many idols and stones in the sanctuary, Shayba taught the prayer to his people. He said, "Here we are, O Lord. Here we are. You have no partner save the ones that are yours. You have dominion over them and whatever they possess."

v.

Abraha was the king of Yemen and the Lord of Sana; he had inherited the kingdom that once belonged to Balamah. Though he was once a slave, his wisdom and his virtue made him the master of his masters. His friends loved him and his enemies feared him, and the people honored and trusted him.

Abraha's heart was virtuous, though he was shrewd. His desires were tame and he had few vices—not envy, not lust, not gluttony, not greed. He was slow to anger; his manner was cordial and deliberate. He was not quick to judge; but when his deliberations ended and he reached his judgment, he acted without hesitation, for he knew his course was the right course and that justice was with him. When Abraha became king, he dedicated his life and the riches of his kingdom to the service of God, for God had blessed him with every good thing. But the anger of God overtook this virtuous king and destroyed him.

In the city of Sana, King Abraha built a magnificent church. After the construction was complete and the bishop of Sana took up residence there, Abraha wrote a letter to the king of Abyssinia and boasted, "I have built this house for God and our savior, Jesus Christ. I have built it to rival the great churches of Rome and Constantinople. I have built it to be a marvel above the pagan shrines of the Arabs. When they come to my city, they will forget their idols. They will abandon their pilgrimages to Bakka where the ignorant kneel before useless stones. They will come to my city instead where, under my protection, they will worship God with a fitting worship in the shadow of this holy house."

Word of this letter came to an Arab trader who had business in Sana and whose name is remembered as Ibn Kinana. He became enraged and said to his friends, "Who is this king who would dishonor the gods of our fathers? What church is this that could offer greater access to the gods than the shrine of Allah in Bakka? God forbid that the tribes of our people should forget the gods in order to worship a fish!"

His friends ignored him, but Ibn Kinana set his heart against the king and his religion. He came one late night into Abraha's great church and defiled it. When Ibn Kinana's friends heard what he had done, they told him, "Leave the city and return home to your tribe. If Abraha discovers what you have done, he will kill you. If you stay, he might kill us too for ever having associated with you."

Ibn Kinana said, "Stand with me against the king."

His friends said, "We don't know you. Return to Bakka and to your tribe before your self-destruction encompasses us all."

Ibn Kinana fled, but the bishop of Sana brought the matter to the king's attention. The king's soldiers made inquiries. When Abraha discovered the name of the one who had defiled his church, he nursed in his heart a desire for vengeance against Ibn Kinana and against the shrine at which Ibn Kinana worshipped.

In his great church, the king listened as the bishop preached a sermon against the evil and abomination of idolatry and how God repaid those who defiled His temple.

The bishop told the congregation, "It is not enough to take this man, Ibn Kinana, into custody and punish him according to our laws. Even if he repented, and we forgave him as Christ surely forgives those who ask forgiveness, still the true source of this evil goes untouched. We may punish him, but others like him will step forward to take his place. We must remove the occasion of their offense; we must turn the poison of their fanaticism into the wine of true faith. Like Rachel, wronged by her father, we must remove the idols from the homes and the temples of unbelievers. We must do as the Lord has commanded: *Overthrow their altars and break down their statues, and burn their groves with fire and break their idols in pieces.*

We must be prompted not by mean revenge but solely by love. Is this not Christ's testimony to all men? We do this for love of those who have assaulted us, to guide them in His straight path. Unless we do this, they will offend us again. But the greatest offense is not that they will defile our churches, for we can turn the other cheek, but that we stand idly by while they persist in gross error. *The worship of abominable idols is the cause, and the beginning and end of all evil.*"

Abraha, who sat apart from the believers, stood up and said, "I swear before God that I will repay Ibn Kinana's offense. But to arrest him will not prevent others like him from desecrating what

we hold most dear. Ibn Kinana is a man. Our enemy is the devil that drives him and drives men like him. *Behold, they are all in the wrong and their works are vain; their idols are wind and vanity.* These gods they worship have mouths that cannot speak, hands that cannot touch, legs that cannot walk, ears that hear nothing and eyes that see nothing. They are harmless. But the men who pay these idols homage are a danger to us and to our kingdom. We will march to Bakka and wreck their shrine and trample their idols. I have read in the book of God that *neither idolatry, heresy, nor any pernicious error whatsoever shall at any time prevail over the Church of Christ*. I will be His sword." When Abraha said this, the people shouted their approval and the bishop anointed the king, calling him "Defender of the Faith" and "an Apostle of Christ."

The king reviewed his preparations for the next day's march; but he felt a sudden hesitance. He had not seen or spoken with his friend, Siraaj, who was Abraha's trusted friend and an officer of his army. In all other undertakings, Siraaj was always in the king's court and always advised the most sensible course of action. Yet in the matter of the march to Bakka and the proposed destruction of the shrine there, Siraaj had said nothing. To put his mind at ease, Abraha looked for Siraaj, to speak with him. The king knew that his friend would advise him well, would confirm the righteousness of his plan, and put his concerns to rest.

Accompanied by his bodyguard, Abraha went to the captains and chiefs of his army and asked where he might find Siraaj. Once directed, Abraha left his bodyguard and entered the barracks where his friend was quartered. There, in the bright light that poured from three windows, Abraha found Siraaj alone, kneeling in a pose of spiritual contemplation, his head down, his eyes tightly shut, his lip trembling in prayer.

Abraha announced himself and said, "You have not been in my court. I've come for guidance."

Siraaj said, "I am an officer of your army. Except for soldiery, what use am I? You have given your orders. Tomorrow we march

for Bakka. We have made the preparations and the army awaits your command."

Abraha said, "You have done your duty; I had no doubt. But I've not come to talk about our preparations or the disposition of the army. I'm here to listen to you. You are my ageless friend. You advised me when I was a slave. You have always given advice in its place and I have never known you to counsel anything but wisdom. Now you say nothing."

Siraaj said, "My past counsel seems fair to you because I agreed with your thinking on every matter. But now my opinion opposes yours."

Abraha frowned. "I know you are blessed. When I was a boy you were a man of thirty. Now I look on you decades later with gray in my hair, yet you remain a man of thirty. I think you are like the patriarchs who lived many hundreds of years; or perhaps you are what the Hebrews called a son of the Elohim. I don't know except that you have wisdom and insight and long life. Are you afraid of me? But, when he spoke the truth, Joseph feared neither Potiphar nor Pharaoh."

Siraaj said, "In the church, you swore an oath before the congregation at the bishop's prompting."

Abraha said, "I swore that oath freely, not because the bishop wanted it, but because I did. I am not subject to him; he is my subject. I decided myself, the moment I learned Ibn Kinana's crime. He defiled my church. I will wreck his shrine. Nothing seems so plain to me as this course of action. If the bishop gives it sanction, so be it. If the people acclaim my oath, so be it. That the bishop offered scriptural justification for my decision only confirms that in this I am an instrument of God's will."

Siraaj said, "You have discerned God's will? Where is this command that God has given? Or has He spoken to you secretly?"

Abraha said, "You will not trap me in blasphemy, but His will is nevertheless clear to anyone with a mind to grasp it. He created

us with the capacity to know Him. He gave us His prophets and His messengers and gave us His son. He also gave us reasoning minds with which we corroborate faith in Him and can prove His existence merely by observing the natural world. Our discerning minds see His handiwork wherever we look. These are His two gifts—natural and revealed religion; this is how a mere man may know His will."

Siraaj said, "You've confused faith in yourself with faith in Him. You know that I wandered the face of the earth. I spent a little time among the Greeks and in the Latin kingdoms. I crossed the sea between Africa and the shores of unknown lands. I wandered beneath the equator and saw in frozen deserts and limitless jungles stars in a new heaven. I've seen all this creation and have learned something about the workings of this world. But in these observations, I've found no indisputable proof of the existence of God. While the world itself could not exist without His explicit command, yet if I have found God in the workings of the world, it is because I have presumed His command was precedent. The Greeks said, 'The world operates in particular ways according to particular laws.' From this they intuit God by supposing that such particular laws as the Greeks have discovered bear witness to an intelligence both in design and application and that such an intelligence, taken to its origin, must be divine. As that source is never reached by the reasoning of men's minds, any other conception, in an effort to disavow divine origin, is just as much taken on faith as the existence of a divine being. By whatever word you call Him, He is unknowable. Yet even so, would man himself not create just such a system of natural laws were it within his power? Man is part of that system; he is a creature of this world and is, by design, indistinguishable from its countless other creatures and manifestations. Hence, he sees the design as the work of a designer, for he too would have created the world in such an image, governing it by such laws as, in fact, exist.

It is God Who is distinguishable, Who is separate from the world and transcends it. Though creation is His, still His creation says nothing of Him. How could it? There is no sufficient analogy for this. If I say He is the Artist and the world is His painting, you will say that we may learn a little of Him from His painting. Yet this is not true of Him and the world. Those who judge a man's paintings are themselves breathing life into the painting, sharing in the creation of the painting with the artist. With Him we share nothing. We are not His partners. If we were to adhere to my analogy, say even that He is the Artist and we are the gnat alighting a little while on a speck of paint, even this is too much and goes too far. Consider only that we are ourselves flecks of paint upon this canvas. What does the painting know of the Artist? Nothing. This might come closest to our true state.

So examining the world, men do not intuit God behind its design. They discover a human intelligence there. Vast though such intelligence surely would be, it is still merely human. So here, nothing is proven to the doubter, nothing is disproved to the believer.

God has divided the waters of knowledge that we may cross to safety. Those who make no distinction between the two—between the ocean of divine knowledge and the ocean of worldly knowledge—will drown like Pharaoh's armies. You cannot attain knowledge of Him by arts and sciences current among men. Only He is sufficient proof of Himself; all the rest are but tokens. You cannot know Him by study of stars or of ages past; though you may be awed by what He has put in motion. You will not discover Him in His creation by study and erudition; but if He has revealed Himself to you and if you have read even a little from His certain book, your study and erudition will seem suddenly and at all times to point to Him. What was hidden from Herod was plain to John. 'I cannot find Him!' 'I find Him everywhere at all times.' Judge between these two and the door of your heart's perception may yet open.

Search all you will by means of reason; yet you will not find Him. His nature, His attributes, and His will cannot be expressed by reference to such objects, attributes, and opinions with which we are familiar. Some suppose that He can be described only by what He is not. I think it not so absolute, but that view carries much truth. Only a few things can positively be said of Him, yet the words we choose—infinite, self-subsisting, unalterable, uncreated—have no meaning or measure in this world. Therefore, in revelation and through His prophets, He offers analogy to Himself, which some understand and others do not. Still, no analogy is wholly adequate. The mirror reflects the sun. It is not the sun. Our capacity to understand is far outstripped by His capacity to reveal. His attributes are infinite; yet we cannot positively describe a single one without limiting Him—and He has no limit.

So now you frantically conjure reason to discover Him; I suspect you summon your arguments to coincide with your beliefs about Him, though He will bear no relationship to your feeble beliefs. The tower of reason cannot reach Heaven. He holds in His hands all laws of man and nature—He transcends them. Only by His self-revelation, and in the specific commands of His messenger of the age, is His will even to be glimpsed.

His intelligence is nothing like our own. What He knows is nothing akin to what we know or even what He reveals to us. Nevertheless, no definitive proof is offered of His existence. So if the reason of your mind and senses here and now is insufficient to prove the existence of God, then how much less will it provide guidance as to how to act in a fashion consistent with what we are required to do as worshippers of God."

Abraha said, "Then let us treat with only what the scripture says of this matter. The bishop recited verses that made clear God's desire."

Siraaj said, "Much of what he said, were they not commands to the ancient Hebrews? Why do you presume that His command to

the Israelites a thousand years ago would still apply today? If He wished to reveal guidance for you on this basis, why would He have sent His son who says nothing of wrecking shrines or persecuting innocents? Jesus supersedes the law given to the Hebrews. He annulled what He would and preserved what He would.

Think awhile about this. Abraham married his half-sister. He is the father of the Hebrews. Jacob married Laban's two daughters. Jacob is the father of the Twelve Tribes. Yet the law revealed by God to the Hebrews forbids marrying one's own sister and prohibits marriage to two women, the daughters of the same man. Abraham and Jacob violated the laws of the Hebrews, yet are not condemned for it!"

Abraha said, "But they lived before the law was revealed by God."

Siraaj said, "Yes, but now we are permitted to eat swine and are forbidden to divorce. The laws have changed again. Ignorant men expect that the laws God reveals to men are, like God Himself, changeless. They make His law His partner and become idolators for it. We have seen the laws change and they will change again, not because God changes, but because the world does. These men also believe that the laws God reveals to men are binding on unbelievers. But one must believe before one may drink from the wine of obedience. God's laws are not binding on the unbelievers; if they were, what difference could there be between those who believe and those who disbelieve? The laws forbidding idolatry are for those who believe in God—that they know the right path. To those who worship Hubal or al-Lat, such a law is meaningless. If you enforce the law with them, do you think they will thank you and become believers for it? This is backwards. First they must believe; then they will obey. The laws commanding us to destroy idolatry are intended for idolatry in our midst, among the believers, though these commands were annulled with the ministry of Jesus."

Abraha said, "Then I will limit myself to the New Testament. I will recite a little for you. *Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. What fellowship has righteousness with unrighteousness? What communion has light with darkness? What concord has Christ with Belial? What part has he that believes with an infidel? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols?* "

Siraaj said, "You have misunderstood these words if by them you hope to justify violence against the people of Bakka or the manner in which they worship. Yes, many of them bow down before despicable idols, but still the name of God is recited there and the names of Jesus and Mary and Abraham."

Abraha said, "This may be true. But the scripture says, *Come out from among the idols and the unbelievers and be separate and touch nothing unclean and I will receive you.* I will march on Bakka and effect this separation."

Siraaj said, "The words of God you've recited are not license to do violence to the people of Bakka or their temple—if it is this you mean by 'separate,' for, as you know, our communities are separate."

Abraha became angry, "They violated the sanctity of my church! They are not separate enough."

"*They* did nothing. It was Ibn Kinana. Take him into custody and punish him. Nothing more than that is justified. You would take these words and twist them to confirm your desire for vengeance."

Abraha said, "You are the one twisting my motives. God has said, *neither idolatry, heresy, nor any pernicious error whatsoever shall at any time prevail over the Church of Christ.*"

Siraaj said, "You do not understand the meaning of these words if you use them in your defense. Those few words are sufficient witness against you. This is the perversion of your reason. Your scriptural justifications are a curtain to conceal from those who would do your bidding, the abomination you cherish in the

temple of your heart. If you worship the idol of your pride, you will not be permitted to cleanse the idols from Bakka."

Abraha said, "I understand their meaning perfectly. God gave us capacity to reason, to discover Him in our midst, to discern His will in our lives, and power to act upon His will to His satisfaction. Yet you say no, so forget proving Him—He may yet be found in His revealed word. The scripture gives us the law, but it is not the law entirely; the scripture reveals God to us, but only as a start. We have minds to grasp Him and hands to do His work. The revealed word of God is not enough without the mind to understand and interpret it. Yet again you deny. I see in these denials that you deny His existence altogether."

Siraaj laughed. "You call me an atheist because my notions of God do not conform to yours. You would make all men atheists. Ask where your reason and your interpretations take you. Do they lead to charity or forgiveness or friendship, or to violence and vengeance and bloodshed? Whatever you believe, you are not motivated by the commandments of your faith but by the wounding of your pride. How quickly you run to reason to justify what you cannot justify on the basis of any clear command. How quickly you abandon reason when it fails to support you."

Abraha said, "You think my conclusions contradict the spirit of Christianity, but consider what God has commanded before. He has destroyed cities and has demanded even of His friend, Abraham, the sacrifice of his son."

Siraaj said, "God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. He did not command him to war with Sodom or Gommorah. Those cities were in conspicuous error, far greater error than committed in Bakka. Yet you sacrifice nothing, but are driven by pride to make war unjustly."

Abraha said, "I would sacrifice my life at God's command, at this moment or whenever He requires it, whether I am king or a slave, whether in manifest glory or amid the ruins of my

achievements. I would sacrifice the thing I love most just as Abraham sacrificed his own son."

Siraaj said, "Isaac was spared."

Abraha said, "It was Ishmael, not Isaac, who was sacrificed. The Angel of God said to Abraham, 'For the sake of your wife Sarah, take Hagar and the boy, your son Ishmael, into the wilderness and leave them there.' Abraham cried out in horror, 'If I leave them there, they will die!' But God did not relent and the Angel did not replace Abraham's son with a lamb."

Siraaj said, "What of the sacrifice of Jesus? He gave his life for the sake of those who destroyed him. So don't speak glibly of sacrifice nor imagine that your oaths are unheard."

Abraha said, "I won't renounce a single oath. I have sworn vengeance on Bakka; I will do God's work there."

Siraaj laughed at this and said, "Your proofs do battle with mine. Your reason takes up arms against mine. The matter is never concluded, except that our lives are concluded. We will not trade wit with mouthfuls of dust. God is the mystery of the world; and more, He is the mystery of man. We are ourselves, within ourselves, signs of the living God—not that the world has rules and thus He is crowned 'rulemaker,' but that we transcend and defy these rules, even to our peril. This is illustration enough that God transcends the laws of the universe that He made. It is our genius even to conceive of Him, to believe in Him despite that the world is insufficient to acknowledge His existence. He says, 'I am proof of Me,' and sets down His word and His warners who say, 'This is proof enough, if you would but see!'

That the clouds move from west to east may not be sufficient proof that the world is round or spins on her axis. Yet still she spins and our arguments, however persuasive, cannot make her do otherwise. So do not say that this or that thing in the world is proof of God. A thousand, a million dissemblers will arise to prove you wrong and will, by this, deny His existence altogether

since your proof came to nothing. Such are our discerning minds. Your proofs and theirs have no power over Him. Do not trouble yourself with anything men say for or against Him. He exists not by acclaim or demands, nor does He sprinkle the world with crumbs of self-promotion. When a gnat rests on your arm, does it acquire any knowledge of the mind you possess? Your proofs cannot avail you. By your reasoning, all those endowed with intelligence and rationality should worship God exactly as you do! Yet you know they do not. The devil himself requires no proof of God; he has looked on His Face. Still, this proof did not preserve him from error. Here is the proof you need: God is proof of you. You prove nothing; He proves everything and, by His proofs, you will unlock the doors of understanding and feel the breezes of divine knowledge upon your cheek.

Yet even if you were able to assemble such proofs that the councils of the wise themselves would tremble at their mention and would hesitate to challenge them, what is it worth? Will these proofs reveal to you His nature or encompass His infinity? No—they lead nowhere. But you are right to say that in the words that He reveals to us, understanding might begin—though these are wholly insufficient to provide us with full understanding. They are enough; He reveals according to our ability to comprehend and they are the key by which you may unlock yourself; to discover in yourself the limitations of your intellect, the worthlessness of your possessions, the empty vanity of your pride."

Siraaj said to Abraha: "How did Abraham's father worship? Or the sons of Adam? They found a god in every tree, in every stone, in clouds and storms, in stars, in all things in the sky and on the earth. Were they not endowed with minds, perception, intelligence and rationality?"

Abraha replied, "They were ignorant. They did not understand the workings of the world that we see every day and to which we give no thought. Abraham abandoned those old ways, for God revealed to him the truth of the matter. Stars are not gods, nor

stones, nor trees, nor rivers—but all these things are a part of creation. They simply did not understand and had no one to tell them. Many of them would surely have embraced the truth if they had known it, if they had comprehended, if it had been revealed to them."

Siraaj said, "They did their best. They used reason and natural inquisitiveness and determined a truth for them no less satisfying than, by use of these same faculties, the view of the world and of God which you have embraced. By the conveyance of rationality, they took a different road than you. So convinced were they by their reasoning and by the reasoning of their fathers, that when prophets came to them with the truth, which was not often in agreement with their own notions, they rebelled. Many of them did not embrace that truth, but acted shamefully and called the prophets of God liars and lunatics and some they even put to death. Abraham's father rejected the truth of God's revelation to his son. Still, the father was obliged to obey Abraham, even if he did not understand. Lot said to the people of Sodom, 'You are acting wickedly and God will punish you.' Yet the people of Sodom laughed at this, saying, 'We act in accordance with our wishes and, only by accepting belief in your uncle's god would these things seem wicked. But we worship as our fathers worshiped and we act as our fathers acted and our gods consider good what your god considers evil. We have worshipped and acted in this fashion for a dozen generations and no punishment has been visited upon us. We are the happiest and most prosperous of people.'"

Abraha said, "But they were wicked and they were punished."

Siraaj said, "Yes, but they foresaw none of it; they could have been saved only by accepting Lot's message, though their worthless desires prevented them. And you will be saved only by accepting my message, though both your reason and your passion dispose you to reject what I have told you."

Abraha insisted, "Again forget reason. I'll tell you what my heart has said to me. I remember the story of the Voice out of

darkness, the mountain on fire, when God spoke to Israel and revealed His commandments to them. The people of Israel were foolish and small and cowered at the sound of God's Voice, rather than praising Him and rejoicing in this blessing. They said, 'We cannot bear His Voice. Let another speak for Him.' I would not have been so afraid, but proud to hear that Voice and I would have never forgotten that day nor disobeyed the commands of God. If the divine Voice is in my heart, who but He has put it there? I know because I know, because I have heard His command in my heart!"

Siraaj said, "The voice you heard is closer to your heart than the place you have given Him. The voice is your pride and your self-absorption. You have tapped a chime on the nightingale's empty cage and said, 'Do you hear his singing?' The Voice of God terrified the Israelites, and if you had heard it, you would not be so manly. That, above all other things, is proof to me that this course of action is not at His behest. If the Voice of God were in your heart, you would have begged to be relieved of the burden of His Voice. Jesus did not rush to the cross. Moses stuttered. Jonah ran away. They were prophets and messengers of God; would you call them cowards?

The bravest of Israel trembled and hid their faces when they heard the Voice, the women wept and tore at their clothes, abandoning all hope for themselves and for their children. The wisest were struck dumb. They said to Moses, 'God has revealed His presence to us and we have heard His Voice out of the darkness and the mountain on fire. This fire will devour us if He speaks to Israel again. We fear Him and His Voice will destroy us or drive us mad. Will you speak for God? If you speak His words to us, we will obey them as though we heard the voice of God Himself in your voice. Intercede with Him for us. We will obey.' God was not angry with these pleas, but granted their wish and said, *They are right in what they have said.* But their progeny obeyed only their whims and their pride; they brayed, 'We are

chosen,' when He had divorced them for their disobedience. They said, 'He will protect us,' while He armed foreign kings to punish them. He has scattered them for their pride, like the builders of the tower of Babel. It was their pride of place with Him and their assumption of His will that undid them; they never thought to ask forgiveness of Him for that. All other sins, even adultery, murder and idolatry, were committed by the people of Israel, but they asked forgiveness and repented and He forgave them every time. But they were arrogant and were proud before all nations; they were stubborn and foolish and never saw in themselves this sin; they never sought His forgiveness for this. They were undone; they violated their covenant and He forgave them and honored the covenant. But when God sent Jesus to call them to account and to establish with them a new covenant and to bless them, they rejected Him. He scattered them to the winds; they will not be gathered up together again until the sun of His glory has risen, when again He shall offer them and all the peoples of the world a new covenant."

Abraha was displeased by Siraaj's words and motioned to quiet him, but Siraaj did not fall silent. More earnestly than before, Siraaj said, "It is pride that motivates you. Do not let it rule over you; do not allow your keen mind to come to its aid with arguments and proofs that conveniently confirm your desire in this matter—to wreak vengeance on Bakka. These arguments and proofs are no shield against the sword of truth; nor are they arrows you can cast to divine His will. You cannot know Him by reason alone nor can you know His work by such feeble interpretations as you have conjured from scripture. You are not permitted to allow your interpretation to become the law itself, equal to or superseding it. Do not take yourself and your reasons as partners to God."

Abraha said, "This is absurd. God has given us the gift of reason; He has provided us with the remarkable ability to understand His clear command. Why else were we made but to do this? Why else

did He reveal His word in flesh? To make such interpretations is human nature; yet you accuse me of idolatry for it!"

Siraaj said, "No; it is not your flawed interpretation of scripture that condemns you; it is your assumption of true and complete understanding and your willingness to sacrifice other lives in God's name, though it is only your name that you are exalting."

Abraha said, "You would have me sit on my hands and let this crime go unpunished?"

Siraaj said, "Turn the other cheek and forgive Ibn Kinana—this is a far clearer command than any you have mentioned. Or prosecute him for his offense according to the laws of your kingdom. But to attack his city and the shrine at which his countrymen worship is to pass beyond the limits both of what is required or even what is permitted."

Abraha said, "By your standards, religion has no use! If I cannot judge on the basis of reason His will or scripture or even His command, how will I serve Him?"

Siraaj said, "If your use of religion is to practice injustice, then I would rather there were no religion at all. If the message of all true faith is love and mercy, then its best use today is to oppose your designs; His command could not be more clear; it is the spirit of His religion in this age. You, however, would make God an accessory to the crime you will commit.

Do you see? He holds the believers to a higher standard. He more quickly forgives the pagans their absurdities than the believers their pride and disobedience. Do not say, 'I am better than they are.' Iblis said as much."

Abraha said, "You have not answered my question. How will I judge?"

Siraaj said, "If you interpret His command in such a way that the conclusion is violence and barbarity, the burden is on you to establish the necessity of it. You talk of your service to His clear command. But you are used to playing the king and you have lost the understanding of true service. If you would know His will, you must purge yourself of pride and self-importance. This single

vice will destroy you. To hear the heavenly nightingale you must first choose to listen. If you are wrapped up in anger and if you busy yourself with evanescent revenge, you will hear nothing, not a note, though he sings outside your window.

Listen for His song and heed His message. Yet you have stuffed your ears with the rags you call reasons."

Abraha said, "Enough! You have revealed yourself. You deny His existence. I imagined that you were my servant, loyal and discerning. I have trusted you too long; you abuse your privilege and speak out of turn to your betters. I am going to Bakka and you are coming with me to destroy their temple."

Siraaj said, "I will not raise a hand against it, even at your command. Ask any other service of me and I will gladly accomplish it. But this I will not do. I see no good end in this for you."

Abraha called his bodyguard into the barracks and ordered them to hold Siraaj. They took his sword and bound his hands. Siraaj did not resist and did not speak a word.

Abraha sneered at his friend, "When I knew you many years ago, you went by the name Khidr. Now you have adopted the name of a desert Arab. I think perhaps your friendship with these tribes has blunted your judgment. Like them you came to this land as a wanderer. Perhaps you worshipped rocks and trees and sacrificed children to Moloch. Perhaps you stole from traders and ransacked their caravans and poisoned the wells of villagers. Perhaps your hidden loyalty to them has given you cause for disloyalty to me. Perhaps you remember too well that I was a slave once and that you were my teacher. Now you will learn from me. You will not be allowed to fight. I would not put a weapon in your hand. But I will take you to Bakka as my prisoner. You will witness what I do. When we return, you will be impaled upon my standard. When you testify to the righteousness of my work and acknowledge that I acted simply as an instrument of God I will allow you to be garroted."

Siraaj said, "I have said what I had to say. The rest is in God's hands."

vi.

Shayba slept in the Hijr and dreamed another dream. He saw before his eyes a great army, led by war elephants. He saw the king of Yemen, wearing golden armor and carrying in his hands a double-bladed sword.

Shayba watched the army from the hills overlooking the shrine and beside him stood his favorite son, Abdullah, who had died only a few months before. Abdullah clasped Shayba by the shoulder, and said, "If you fight him, he will crush the city. You will die and my wife, Amina, will have no protector; and you will never see my unborn son."

Shayba looked at his son, then turned his eyes back to the army advancing toward the city.

Abdullah said, "If you fight to defend the shrine, you will die and the shrine will be razed to the ground. My son will have no home and no tribe."

Shayba said, "Who will defend the shrine?"

Abdullah said, "The shrine is not yours; it is not your concern. If you fight to defend the shrine, you are defending Ibn Kinana. Do not spill a drop of blood on his account, or you will be cursed as Ibn Kinana is cursed."

Shayba was awakened by the city watchman. The watchman said, "There are lights in the desert. Abraha's army is on the march and will be in Bakka in two days. The people say he is coming to wreck the shrine."

Shaking off sleep, Shayba met with the leaders of the tribes. Some supported Ibn Kinana and argued that they should stand and fight when the army arrived. Shayba, who was chief of the Quraysh, remembered his dream and said, "We are no match for those batallions. If we go out and defy Abraha in battle, his legions will destroy us and his way to the shrine will be open while our wives and children are defenseless. Abraha is right to be angry with us. Ibn Kinana defiled his church and we have protected him. We must surrender him."

Some scoffed at this. “Ibn Kinana is a member of this community. Whatever his offense, we must protect him.”

Shayba said, “Ibn Kinana is a criminal and a fugitive. By protecting him and fighting for him, we become his accomplices.”

Others declared, “We must defend the shrine from Abraha. We are its keepers. If we will not save it, who will?”

Shayba said, “Let the owner of the shrine defend the shrine. It is not ours. If it belonged to us, it wouldn’t be worth the pilgrimage. Our defense of it isn’t useful. Ibn Kinana violated Abraha’s church in the name of our religion. Look what that has brought—an army at our borders. We should evacuate the city; the men, the women, and children should go to the hills overlooking Bakka. Abraha will not pursue us.”

A few of the notables said, “This is unmanly. We have nothing to fear of Abraha’s army. If we defend the shrine, the gods themselves will stand beside us and will protect us from harm. Yet Shayba will have us wearing women’s clothing and hiding like cowards. If we do nothing but sit on our hands, then we deserve to suffer.”

Shayba said, “To fight in the name of the shrine and yet to expect the shrine to defend us, to allow us to prevail, is blasphemy. Israel carried the Ark of the Covenant to battle against the Philistines and imagined that the Ark would do as they wished. But the covenant did not make God a servant of Israel; the Philistines slaughtered thousands and carried off the Ark. I will ride to Abraha’s camp in the morning to petition him. I will offer to surrender Ibn Kinana, if he will turn his army around and leave our shrine intact.”

One of the tribal elders said, “Will he accept your offer?”

Shayba said, “If his eye is on the shrine and its destruction is his prize, he will refuse. If he refuses, then I have still done right by him and Ibn Kinana’s crime will not fall on our shoulders.”

At dawn, Shayba told his son, Harith, “Take 200 of my camels and lead them toward Abraha’s army. When his soldiers confiscate

them, tell them that the camels are my property and that I will come to claim them."

In the outskirts of Bakka a patrol of Abraha's army found Harith and the camels. They said, "Return to Bakka and tell your people to surrender the shrine." Harith said nothing. The soldiers said, "Go! But leave the camels here. We will look after them now."

Harith said, "They are not yours. They belong to my father, Abd al-Muttalib. He is the chief of the Quraysh, the largest tribe in Bakka."

The soldiers laughed. "We will keep the camels anyway. Go home!"

Harith said, "You have no right to these animals. Abd al-Muttalib will come to your camp and claim them." Harith then turned and rode toward Bakka.

The soldiers led the camels to Abraha's camp. Abraha questioned them; they said, "These animals belonged to a chief of Bakka. He may come to claim them."

Abraha was delighted. He said, "I understand this chief perfectly. He is using the camels as an excuse to parley, to assay our strength, to determine our motives. The camels are an offering! When Abd al-Muttalib comes, bring him to my tent."

Harith returned directly to his father. Shayba embraced him, mounted his horse, and said, "Make certain that the city is evacuated by tomorrow morning. If I do not return, you are responsible for looking after Abdullah's widow, Amina, and after her son, your nephew."

Harith said, "How do you know Amina will bear a son?"

Shayba did not answer, but said, "If I can, I will return. Do not take up arms against Abraha, whatever the provocation. Swear it."

Harith said, "By Hubal and al-Uzza, we will not fight."

Shayba rode quickly and reached Abraha's camp by mid-afternoon. Abraha's soldiers stopped him and asked his business.

Shayba said, "I am Abd al-Muttalib. You have stolen property that belongs to me."

Abraha's soldiers disarmed Shayba and brought him to the king's tent. Inside, Abraha was reclining before an ivory table. Nearby stood a soldier of high rank, whose sheath was empty and whose hands were bound.

Shayba said, "I am Abd al-Muttalib. I am the chief of the Quraysh tribe of the city of Bakka and I am a keeper of the Kaaba, the temple that you propose to violate."

Abraha said, "I know who you are but not why you've come."

Shayba said, "When you entered the precincts of Bakka, your soldiers confiscated 200 of my camels. They belong to me. Will you return them?"

Abraha frowned, "My army is poised to wreck your shrine. I've come to destroy your religion and the religion of your fathers, but you only care about camels?"

Shayba said, "The camels are mine. The shrine belongs to others who will bring you to account if you move against it."

Abraha said, "I will leave your people in peace and safety. I come only for the shrine you call the Kaaba. Tell your people to allow me passage to it, and no harm will come to you or your people."

Shayba said, "The shrine does not belong to us. It is another's property and you will not be permitted to destroy it."

Abraha laughed at this, "I know a little something of your shrine. It has no roof, it is hot and dusty and filled with obscene idols, fit only for the fire. Tell me, to whom does this shrine belong that he would stop us?"

Shayba said, "It belongs to the gods, and the God of your church is chief among them."

Abraha said, "There are no gods but God. And I do not think God would establish a shrine in a barren desert and fill it with idols of gods other than Himself."

Shayba said, "The idols, like the shrine, are under His protection and He feels no prejudice against the desert. After all, if these were gardens over-flowing with fruits in abundance, all would come for the sake of the shrine; what of the Master of the shrine?

The shrine is not lovely; but remember the story of Moses in the wilderness, when a foreigner approached him and said, 'You are a prophet of God, but your face is the face of a criminal; you have a thief's eyes and a murderer's hands and a liar's voice.' Moses laughed and said, 'This is all true. I have murdered a man and fled from justice. But God has chosen me and by His choice, I am transformed from the least of men to the greatest of them.'"

Abraha said, "The great cathedrals of Christendom are holy and under God's protection. But not this dusty shrine which you have defiled with idols."

Shayba said, "Outward beauty is as much a curse as a blessing. Who was more beautiful in his day than Joseph, the son of Jacob? But his beauty drew Zuleika to him, and she sought to quench her longing in him. When he refused her, she said, 'If I let him go, he will belong to another, and I cannot bear this. If I cannot possess his beauty, I will destroy it.' So she bore witness falsely against Joseph and conspired to ruin him. When soldiers from the West come to Constantinople, do you think its loveliness will keep them from looting it, or burning it? No, its beauty only inflames their lust for riches and ruin. Ibn Kinana saw your beautiful cathedral, but its beauty did not protect it from his desecration."

Abraha became angry at this. "Ibn Kinana defiled my church, and this alone has brought destruction upon the shrine that you have defiled with the idols your people honor. Your worship is error. But this argument is pointless. I will try again to help you understand.

Before I was king, I was a slave. I ascended to kingship by no earthly power, but by the blessing of God and of the messiah, Jesus Christ. In truth, no king rules without God's blessing, but few kings acknowledge this, for they are, on the whole, proud

and disdainful. Even Iblis was a prince among angels for a time. But I recognize God's hand in my success, and I put His throne above my throne. And this I declared publicly by building a great cathedral in this land. No church in Christendom is lovelier nor is there another more holy. If, as you say, my cathedral is Joseph, all other churches are his brothers, gone astray and before my church, all others should bow. But your shrine is even less still; it is unholy. If Sana is Joseph, then Bakka is the wolf."

Shayba said, "But the wolf never harmed Joseph, though his brothers said it did. In the story of Joseph, there was no wolf, only the wolfish lies of those who sold him out and wept false tears with their aggrieved father. Bakka is no Sana; we know. It is no Rome, no Constantinople. Bakka, as you can see, is dry and barren, you are right. So pay it no mind and turn aside. Return to Sana; we will surrender Ibn Kinana and you can go home in peace. Take him and punish him according to your law. He has acted wickedly and we will hand him over."

Abraha said, "He defiled my church! He did so in worship of the perverse idols in your shrine. Should I punish him and yet let others continue to believe that there are any gods other than God? No. To let your worship continue defiles God's church as much as Ibn Kinana defiled my cathedral. I will destroy the shrine. Why defend it? When we are done, your homes will be intact, your wells untainted, your people unmolested. But the shrine itself is an abomination and we will raze it to its foundations."

Shayba said, "Listen to what you are saying. Ibn Kinana defiled your cathedral? You say God blessed you and gave you all good things; you have prospered and now you put His throne above yours? For whom did you build this church that Ibn Kinana defiled? Perhaps you should worry more about the idol in your shrine than the idols in ours.

Mullah Omar was a warlord who ruled over the city of Kandahar. Omar's family was poor and he was illiterate. Invaders from the north occupied his country. Omar and his

comrades took to guerilla warfare, harassing the enemy at every opportunity. Omar distinguished himself in battle, and lost an eye in fighting. After ten years, the invaders withdrew, but had left his country in chaos. Omar and his comrades did not disband. They took power in Kandahar. Omar became master of the city and surrounding countryside. All of this success he attributed to the providence of God; Omar was uneducated and his lineage and his inheritance meager. He recognized that only the hand of God could have permitted him to prevail. He imagined that his rule over Kandahar was by divine mandate. One-eyed, like Iblis, he styled himself commander of the faithful and believed he had knowledge of the will of God. He imposed over the people God's laws as he literally understood them.

One night Mullah Omar had a dream. He stood in the shadow of a great mountain made in the shape of a man with a face like his own. The earth began to tremble and shudder. With his own eyes he saw the mountain disintegrate, and the rubble fell over him, burying him, suffocating him. In his dream, he cried, 'What have I done? Why has this happened?' And Omar heard a voice booming: 'You have worshipped an idol. Avoid this end by destroying the idols in your midst.'

Omar awoke and thought a little while. He and his advisors interpreted his dream as a warning from God to destroy the great stone statues of men that had been carved from the mountains by the ancient inhabitants of his country.

Omar dispatched soldiers into the mountains to bring these statues down; though they were faraway and inaccessible. Since no one had worshipped at them for generations, few knew of their whereabouts, or even their existence. After some time, Omar's soldiers collapsed the statues and returned home.

Omar's successes emboldened him; he believed that he was chosen to spread God's law throughout the world. To this end, he befriended madmen and dangerous fanatics who believed as he did. In one another's causes they enlisted, embarking on

assassination of rivals and the murder of innocents who did not believe as they believed. His neighbors, both opponents and friends, were horrified.

These acts at last brought invaders into his country, even those who had formerly supported Omar. They came this time not only from the north, but from all directions; and his own people overthrew him. He and his men fled into the mountains, but the invaders scoured the land and the mountains fell upon him, burying him. He said, 'It is like my dream, but I destroyed the idols.' Suddenly, he saw the mountain in his dream again and saw its face was his own. As it crumbled, he heard a still, small voice saying, 'The idol was not made of stone. The idol was your presumption that you knew God's will.'"

Abraha said, "I won't deny that Ibn Kinana injured me when he defiled the church I built. But consider the service I can render you by destroying this shrine. When I have gone, build a new shrine for God and you will prosper as I have prospered. Your people are ignorant; my destruction of the shrine will open their eyes to their error. Your people are backward and oppressed by foolish worship of useless gods. I am bringing you an opportunity to worship God with a fitting worship. Don't you see that?"

Shayba said, "We are ignorant? We are backward and oppressed? This may be true. Let me give you some more truth. You are proud and arrogant. We are a little people and you are great and we should take instruction from you. Is this the message you bring along with the destruction of God's shrine? You will not succeed."

Abraha said, "I have offended you. I am sorry that I have injured your pride, though you imagine it is my pride you have injured."

Shayba said, "Then we are both proud and our peoples are proud. What of it? I'm not ashamed to admit it. But you come here as though you were our better. We are a little people. Be afraid of us for that.

Before Moses, the Hebrews had become slaves. Who fears a people reduced to penury and bondage? But when God appointed

Moses, the Hebrews were exalted over their masters. Pharaoh and his armies could not stop them.

Before Saul was king, who obeyed him? Not even his donkeys. The Israelites told Samuel, 'Give us a king.' Samuel said to them, 'What use do you have for a king? God is king enough for you.' But God commanded Samuel to be patient with the people; so Samuel said, 'God will give you a king; but you must respect His choice, for He knows best.'

So Samuel took a branch from a tall tree as God commanded. He told the Israelites, 'Whoever is as tall as this branch but no taller, he will be king of Israel.'

All the notable people gathered and the men took turns, each standing beside the branch. For some it was too tall, for others too short, and no man matched it. Saul, half in jest, took a turn. Beside him the branch stood neither too tall nor too short. The people said to Samuel, 'He cannot be king. He is a water carrier and nothing more. His tribe is not a tribe of kings. His clan is the lowliest clan of his tribe. His family is the least of them that belong to his clan.'

Samuel said, 'The accident of your birth is no cause to rejoice or despair, nor is it a sign of merit. Whether well-born or lowly, whether wealthy or poor, strong or weak, you are God's and to Him you will return.' He blesses whomever He will; He does not ask your opinion.

So though we are oppressed, ignorant and backward, if God's eye falls on us, we would set the world on its end and your conceits would seem small, silly and empty and your kingdom would be a backward province of our far-flung empire. Do not judge my people on the outward appearance of things. Think again of the story of Joseph, before he was in Egypt.

Joseph said to his father, 'I have had a wondrous dream. I saw fixed in the heavens eleven stars and the sun and the moon. When my eyes focused on them, they made obeisance to me.'

Jacob rebuked his son, 'What fantasy is this? Will I, your father, and your mother and your eleven brothers—all but one superior to you in age and attainments—bow down to you in foolish adoration?' But Jacob said nothing more and thought on Joseph's vision for awhile.

The brothers of Joseph, when they heard this latest dream, said to Jacob, 'The boy is impudent. We are, except Benjamin, his elder brothers and his betters. You should punish him before his self-worship makes him insufferable.'

Jacob forbade any punishment of Joseph, but took the boy aside privately, saying, 'Your brothers know you are my favorite and that I have spoiled you. They believe you have made up these dreams to further exalt yourself over them and I am certain that they will conspire against you. Keep your visions to yourself.'

Joseph said, 'I meant no insult nor did I venture an interpretation, though God has given me powers to interpret. No, they interpreted this dream; they have insulted me and disbelieved simply because they have lived a moment longer than I have. Surely God's patience with them is over. I have never shown them disrespect, yet still they say, 'We are better than Joseph.' Iblis said the same of Adam. But whether my brothers plot against me in their hearts or openly together, the truth of my state is beyond their comprehension—even were I to age forty years in a single day and sprout white hair before their eyes.'"

Abraha said, "Now you are Joseph. But I still see the wolf in you. You are all plunderers, brigands, and idolaters. A station like Joseph's is beyond your reach. It is impossible. You don't even have a Jacob to vouch for you."

Shayba said, "Was Moses not a murderer before he was chosen? Was Pharaoh not the mightiest of kings before he was toppled by pride and disbelief that the Hebrews had escaped his power? Do not think that Joseph's station is beyond us plunderers, brigands and idolaters. Remember Jacob's error when his sons brought their

father news of Joseph's death. He grieved terribly, but demanded in his heart, 'Where are your visions now, my little boy?'"

Shayba continued, "It is still His house, whatever we have done to it—with us He will do as He pleases. It was built for remembrance and it will again be so. When he divided Canaan with Abraham, what seemed fairer to Lot was foul and what seemed foul to Lot was fair.

In Yemen, in the land where you rule as king, there once lived another king like you. His people were rich and powerful merchants who traded here and in Yathrib. Their king was Asad Abu Karib. He traveled every year to this desert with his sons, who assisted him in his transactions. On one journey, he left his youngest son in Yathrib in the care of a trusted friend. This boy was the solace of his father's heart; he was a beautiful youth with a face and form like Joseph's. The daughter of this friend fell in love with the young man and attempted to seduce him. The youth rejected her. She called out to her brothers, saying, 'This one has unveiled me. He forced himself on me.' At her provocations, her brothers slit the boy's throat.

The girl's father discovered the youth's blood-soaked body and cried out to his sons, 'What have you done? You have murdered this child on the accusations and lies of your sister. You have cut your own throats. Your crime will bring the anger of Abu Karib and his people down on us all.' He then chose his oldest son to deliver the news to Abu Karib at once. He gathered the most precious belongings of his household and gave them to his son to offer as blood money. In the morning, the son departed and, as Yathrib receded in the distance, he said to himself, 'When I tell Abu Karib what my brothers and I have done, he will kill me.' He then determined to flee to the north, away from Abu Karib. But he took to unfamiliar roads and was waylaid by highwaymen who stole his treasure and his horse. He lay dying in the desert, tortured by thirst for several days until Abu Karib's men found him and saved his life. While the young man recovered they told him that their master was returning directly to Yathrib. Abu Karib

arrived a few days later and spoke to the youth. He asked him why he was in the desert and also asked about his son. The youth told him what had happened. He cut off the youth's left hand, saying, 'This was for stealing. For the murder of my son, I will return to Yathrib and put you and all of your tribe to death.' The youth was given a horse and sent directly to Yathrib where he told his father and the people of the city what Abu Karib had said.

Abu Karib returned to Yemen and gathered a force of men sufficient to raze the city of Yathrib and slaughter its inhabitants. They marched directly for Yathrib. He said, 'I will deal with them as they dealt with my son.'

Abu Karib's army encamped outside Yathrib. The people of the city panicked, but two rabbis calmed them and went to parley with Abu Karib, just as I have come to you. They were members of the Banu Qurayza, a Jewish tribe in the city. Abu Karib said, 'I have no quarrel with the Jews, even of that cursed city.' He agreed to meet with them and offered them his hospitality.

They said to him, 'You must not try to destroy the city or put its people to the sword. You are right to be angry for your son's murder, and we will turn over to you those who were responsible, or we will pay you blood money. But you must abandon your vengeance.'

Abu Karib said, 'Do not be afraid of me. Tell the people of your tribe and the other Jews in the city to leave tonight. I will give them safe passage. But money cannot assuage me, nor the blood of those whom the people of Yathrib choose to accuse of my son's murder. Whoever is in the city tomorrow will die. I will raze Yathrib and cut down its palms.'

The rabbis persisted, 'According to our traditions, a prophet of God will choose Yathrib as his refuge after his own tribe turns against him. If you try to destroy this city, God will stop you, and we are afraid that a terrible thing will befall you.'

Abu Karib took their words seriously and told them, 'It is late. I will sleep. Tomorrow I will make my decision. You are free to leave.'

That night, Abu Karib dreamed a beautiful dream. He saw his dead son in Paradise, caparisoned like a prince of Heaven and surrounded by attendants. Weeping, the father embraced his son and asked him how he was. The son smiled, saying, 'It is as you see. When I was murdered, houris lifted me to this garden and I swore my allegiance to the prophets of God who came before, and the one soon to come. I am in His service.'

Abu Karib opened his mouth to speak, but his son said, 'Men of God came to you today and told you to abandon your plan against Yathrib. Now I will ask you to spare the city and its people. For His sake, I renounce my vengeance against them.'

Abu Karib awoke and abandoned his designs. He ordered his army to break camp. He converted to the religion of the rabbis and he and his army returned to Yemen where he lived out his days in prosperity and peace with God."

Abraha said, "What religion do you offer me, my brother? You are idolaters, not God's servants like the rabbis. What faith do you profess that should turn me away from punishing you and destroying your little shrine of godlings?"

Shayba said, "We have gone astray, it is true. But, whatever we have done to the shrine, it is still God's and He will not allow you to destroy it. I've not come here to plead for mercy, but to offer you a chance to forsake your foolish vow. We will give you Ibn Kinana—but you must give up your threat against the Kaaba."

Abraha said, "I will wreck it!"

Shayba said, "Are you so certain that its master will not defend it or that it is His will that you destroy it?"

Abraha said, "My mind is fixed upon the single goal; the destruction of this shrine is the reason I set out. You won't be able to dissuade me."

Shayba said, "You have called me brother. You know the story of the first brothers. Abel made a blood sacrifice to God. God accepted Abel's portion, but rejected Cain's. Cain said, 'Why have You chosen my brother's sacrifice and not my own?'

The Angel of God said, ‘Do not ask from Us what you cannot bear to receive. Do not think that the secrets of your heart are hidden from Us. We know best the worth of Abel’s offering, and yours.’

Cain said inwardly, ‘I too will make a blood sacrifice.’ He murdered his brother and hid his body. The Angel of God said, ‘What you have done is far worse than what you have ever done before. When We rejected Cain’s sacrifice, Abel did not shed your blood, though he knew God favored him and rejected you. Now you have rid yourself of him, and We are rid of you. Speak to Iblis; he will be your guide on this road!’”

Shayba said, “Do not take this road to Bakka. It is not your road. God’s shrine is in Bakka; it is His house. Even fouled by idolatry, still it is His and He will favor it over your pride. Ignorance and idolatry is preferred to boasting and fanaticism.”

Shayba stood, and prepared to leave. Abraha stayed him for a moment. “Tomorrow, you and I will meet again in battle. Though you have chosen to fight, I do not consider you an enemy.”

Shayba said sharply, “You will not meet me in battle tomorrow. My people have elected not to defend the shrine, for God has power enough to defend it Himself. If you are right, then its destruction will mean nothing. If I am right, however, He will stop you.”

Abraha said, “Then this meeting was for nothing. I had only hoped to persuade you to give us passage to the shrine. If you have chosen not to fight, then why did you come?”

Shayba said, “I came for my camels.”

Abraha smiled at this. He waved the guards over, saying, “Let him go in peace. And return his camels to him.”

vii.

In the hills overlooking Bakka, the people of the city watched Abraha’s men begin toward the shrine. In the empty city soldiers kicked up yellow dust. Within sight of the shrine, the elephants, leading columns of troops, stopped in their tracks.

Abraha's lieutenants tried every blandishment then resorted to the whip. But the elephants bore their punishments. They would not go a step further, not dragged nor scourged. The oldest and strongest among them was called Periklytos and, as he sat upon his haunches, the people of Bakka in the hills cheered and said, "Look, their elephant kneels before our shrine!" The men in Abraha's army took this as a bad sign.

Still with his hands tied, though standing in a place of honor next to the king, Siraaj said, "Remember the story of Balaam's donkey. These elephants are not dumb animals. They serve you even now, though they seem to refuse service and reject your authority. But they serve you now as no other has served you before. Send me to Shayba, and I will bring Ibn Kinana down from the hills and into your custody to do with as you please. But leave this shrine alone."

Abraha became angry. "I've heard this from Shayba's own lips. Do you serve me or him? Perhaps you would go into the hills with him and stay there, a fugitive from me." He turned to another lieutenant and said, "Untie him. Let him run to his new master."

An officer approached to untie Siraaj's hands, but Siraaj refused. "Keep them bound." He turned to Abraha, "I have offered nothing but loyalty and fair counsel. You have refused both. But I will not leave you or disavow service to you; I am your servant. I will go where the elephants will not and I will serve you as best I am able, though I cannot save you from the power you confront."

Abraha waved away Siraaj's words. He turned to his officers. "Leave the elephants. We will proceed without them." But as the army grew closer to the shrine, the dust they kicked up became a thick and choking yellow cloud. The hot air and the winds began to play in it until, for every man, there were several twisting funnels of dust, spinning and reaching up with tendrils of sand like the keepers of the elephants with their whips. The men began to hesitate, covering their faces with the fabric of their shirts, their movement forward slowed by the currents of wind in the sand.

Siraaj said, "All they will see, and the last they will see, are the walls of the shrine."

Above the roiling blanket of dust that encompassed Abraha's army, a darker cloud of wings and talons formed overhead. Stones rained down on Abraha's men wounding some, striking others dead where they stood while the dust and sand began to blow upon them with such force that it lifted them off of their feet and scourged them, drenching them in their own blood, shredding their clothes. Still the wounded soldiers moved toward the shrine.

Shields of sand scoured their faces. Tongues of sand drew blood from their flesh and tasted their wounds. Some broke ranks and ran and others stood their ground, but none escaped. Men screamed, blinded and panicking; some threw down their weapons, only to die as the winds hurled spears and swords back upon them. Abraha's officers tried to keep order, but were victims themsleves of the sand and of the stones from the sky. Men went mad with terror, turning in every direction, tossed up in the air like rags, killing each other as they tried to escape.

From the hills, a cheer went up from the people of Bakka. Shayba, who watched Abraha's army destroyed in sight of the shrine, quieted them. For the first time, Shayba felt afraid for his tribe. He said, "What is this power? It does not serve us nor act at our request or on our behalf. This power is another's. God forbid that we become its victims."

In moments, Abraha's army was no more. Through a thick veil of dust, the king watched living sand swallow up his soldiers. The sand and wind, like an army of djinns, gave no quarter. Abraha cried out, "They are the evil spirits of the shine—faith will overcome them!" He threw himself into the whirlwind.

In the midst of dust and sand, Abraha swung his sword at these invisible enemies. But his blows had no effect. He was struck by a stone from the heavens. His bones cracked with the blow. Siraaj ran to the king and threw his body over him to protect him. The

king's bodyguard pulled Abraha and Siraaj to safety. The king's wounds were mortal and they rushed him to his surgeon. The few soldiers still alive in the dust shouted and cried out and wept, but there was no rescue for them.

By early evening, the birds were gone and the dust had settled. Shayba and his sons went down into the field. They found no trace of Abraha's army except discarded weapons and bloody tatters of flesh and clothes. A few officers had fled to the rear where their king lay dying. But the army was gone; except for a single elephant which lowed as though mourning the soldiers who went forward and were cast down. Shayba approached the animal, afraid that it was wounded. The elephant rose up before him; Shayba looked into its sad yet uncomprehending eyes. "What would you say to me, Ahmad, if you had words in your mouth? What warning would you give?" The elephant turned, and began lumbering away from Bakka.

A few of the Bakkans scavenged for booty in the sand. Shayba said, "I will kill any man who takes from these soldiers." He organized the men of his tribe to gather up the weapons and rags and they buried them within sight of the shrine.

In the tent of the king's surgeon, Siraaj was brought to Abraha's bed. When Siraaj saw the king's state, he wept without shame. He knelt and placed his hands on the king's chest. In that moment, pain left Abraha's body, and fear abandoned his heart. He said to Siraaj, "I prayed that the messiah might come and bring me solace."

Siraaj said, "I am not him; I am only a friend."

Abraha said, "But with bound hands, you have loosened the knot of my soul."

Siraaj said, "While you live, I serve you."

Abraha said, "I have wronged you. You were faithful and I rejected you and treated you shamefully. But I was so certain. Even now I don't understand. Did I do wrong by them? They

are idolaters and polluters; I was bringing them the true faith, to purify their corrupt religion."

Siraaj said, "His work is not like yours, nor can you perform for Him what He performs."

Abraha said, "Friend, I thought I was His instrument. I thought I knew His will."

Siraaj said, "The rod does not cast Moses; nor does the sea split him. Your work is not like His. You can know nothing of His knowledge; now you know this by yours."

Abraha said, "My army, my poor men. Look where I have led them. Now they're dead and I'm to blame; and now I die knowing I was unworthy of your loyalty, or theirs."

Siraaj said softly, "The dead await you. Your guard of honor stands ready in Paradise to receive you."

Abraha smiled and whispered, "I hear the nightingale."

When Abraha died, Siraaj unfastened Abraha's sword, cut the rope still binding his hands, and sheathed the sword as his own. Siraaj removed his robe and wrapped the king's body in it. He left the king's camp and made for Bakka's mud huts not far away.

After the people of Bakka had returned to their houses, Shayba went to see Amina, the widow of his son Abdullah. Amina was nursing her newborn child. She said, "Abdullah's son, your grandson, was born today." He said, "What have you named him?"

Amina said, "I have named him for the elephant who would not desecrate the shrine, but knelt in homage. His name is Muhammad."

Shayba asked to carry Muhammad to the shrine. Amina gave the infant to Shayba and said, "Consecrate him to the gods."

In the pitch of night, Shayba cradled the sleeping child in his arms and knelt in the shrine, lit only by a single flickering candle. He held the child and knelt before the idol of Hubal and prayed: "Here we are, O Lord. Here we are. You have no partner save the

ones that are yours. You have dominion over them and whatever they possess," which was the prayer he had taught the people of Bakka after he dug the well. And when he finished his prayer and prostrated himself before the idol, Shayba detected the presence of another in the shrine. Shayba turned and saw standing in the doorway a soldier of Abraha's army, the one who attended him the previous day. The soldier was covered in dust and blood, but was himself unharmed. In his left hand, he held Abraha's sword.

Shayba fell back, turning to protect the child in his arms. But the soldier laughed at him.

"I am not here to hurt you. Don't you remember me?"

Shayba said, "You are Abraha's lieutenant; you were a prisoner in his tent when I spoke with him."

The soldier said, "I served him when he needed my service. Now he is dead and has no need for this poor servant's advice. You, however, are in greater need of it than he ever was."

Shayba studied the soldier's face. His brow furrowed in recognition; he said, "I have seen you before?"

The soldier said, "I am Siraaj, a servant of God. Offer me a little water from the well I told you to dig."

And when Siraaj said this, Shayba remembered the angel in his dream and trembled. He said, "You are Hubal."

"That is not my name, nor do these idols represent me; nor do they represent the One Who has sent me. These stones are an abomination to Him."

Shayba said, "Did you see what happened to your master's army when he came to purify this house?"

Siraaj laughed again. "My Master has no armies. The armies of my friend Abraha were turned back. But it is by no special virtue that you possess that Abraha was prevented from entering this sanctuary.

Did you know that his cause was just and yours unjust? But God made you to prevail that He might chastise you for your unbelief

through this little one in your arms. He has said, 'I will punish you with a rod from your own tree.'"

Shayba said, "My argument was the correct one. I was right. How can you say that your king's cause was just? My arguments were superior. My analogies were more perfect than his. If he had honestly weighed my truth against his slanders, he would have discovered his error. He would have repented and given up his campaign against the shrine and would be alive this very moment, a guest in my house."

Siraaj said, "Do not confuse your talk for reality. In the end your prattling has no more relation to the world than the most ignorant and debased notions. Measured by men's reason, the world is madness. Do not think your pretty stories make it sane or even comprehensible. They make it merely tolerable to the feeble reason of those simply human. They offer illustrations, but even these are veils between our imaginings and the truth of the matter."

Shayba said, "The king's defeat, his utter ruin, was sufficient witness to his error. I was right. I told him what would happen and it did and he did not believe; he is dead for his error. It's not as you say. I was in the right. My argument was more perfect."

Siraaj said, "There were two brothers who worshipped God in Aden. Every morning each took a turn in the traditional call to prayer. But dispute arose between them. The elder brother, who had traveled in the company of the righteous and taken instruction from them in all manner of religious ritual believed the words of the call were pronounced in a particular way. The younger brother, for his part, had learned by local tradition and imitation the stress and pronunciation of the call in a different form. The older brother said, 'You are mistaken. You are pronouncing the call improperly.' But the younger brother was proud and would not take instruction. Their dispute became violent; the older brother, in a fit of foolish anger, struck the younger. The local

magistrate took the older brother into custody and punished him according to the laws of the city for attacking his brother.

In this way you might understand how Abraha was right in his belief, but wrong in his actions. Though God reproved him, the king erred only a little. He proposed to punish you in God's name because he imagined to fathom God's will. He is dead for this. But were I to show him to you in his present state, you would fall down to worship him; he consecrated himself to God, and for this there is no end of reward, though it seemed to you a punishment. His punishment of the king was in truth the sweetest mercy and a healing balm. He deprived the king of victory over you, but granted him a greater victory than you could imagine. Not because God honors you does He punish them; no. If you have prevailed for a time, do not feel vindicated. He will treat with you in the end."

Siraaj continued, "Iblis was the best of believers among the angels. His worship was as near to perfect as any man's or angel's ever was."

As Siraaj spoke of Iblis, the room grew dark. In the carving of red agate of Hubal, Shayba detected movement. His heart leapt at the sight of it. Siraaj said, "But Iblis fell. He was given to see the gift of God's manifestation in Adam, but rejected it because Iblis wished God's will to be other than what it was. Do you know what Iblis said?"

And the carving began to speak; its voice tinny and distant, but monstrous. "I am the best of the angels and You create this thing to worship You? And more, You expect me to bow down to it when You and I know the truth of the matter? I have sworn to bow down to none but You! Sweep this dust away."

Shayba, in terror, pushed the idol over and its motion ceased and the light of the room was restored.

Siraaj said, "Iblis did not understand God's will. Abraha believed he understood it. Do you believe you understand it? You are all wrong. And if punishment falls on any of you, though you

are in disagreement with one another, do not think it is victory for your foolish imaginings.

By the guide and compass of mortal reason, by the measure of human comprehension, God is a lunatic. He is cruel and capricious, thirsty for innocent blood. He is a butcher—every seeming mercy is exposed as deceit and crass hypocrisy. Yet mortal is not moral. If there are such things as right and justice and good, they cannot be established on the foundations of evanescent human comprehension nor may they be assayed in the meager extent of human attainment.

What permanence you imagine yourselves to possess. What stillness and quietude. But I have been alive since before this patch of earth was settled by men. I have seen the generations come and go, each in conspicuous error about the nature of things. Humanity is fluid, restless, shifting, yet imagines itself immovable and impermeable stone, utterly ignorant of its fluidity.

You are not fit to judge the reality of God, you who cannot even predict tomorrow's weather. Your analogies are a taste of reality; at their best they are reflections of shadows. But they are not proof. At their worst, they are dangerous delusions. A man can cut his own throat with the sharpness of his exegesis."

Siraaj said, "However perfect or sublime your argument, it is only a token or a symbol representing a truth words cannot bear but minds may yet embrace. However honeyed the words of your argument, however artfully constructed the edifice of your reason, neither honey nor art makes words true. If you were right, it was not for any reason that you divined. The kings of old built great pillars to support the moon and the stars in the heavens; they feared that the canopy of heaven would fall to earth and destroy their kingdoms. But the heavens gave no thought to such structures and had no use for them, though men imagined otherwise.

In the days before Abraham, the whole world spoke the same language of reason and analogy, but more perfectly than you or

I do; only the prophets of God have matched and exceeded the eloquence of these ancient sons of Adam. Their words and their arguments were sweet poetry, enchanting even the angels at His threshold, though the words were often false. Men had learned the poetry from God; but they had learned dissimulation from Iblis and from the promptings of their own worthless desires. They abused their precious gifts and were wicked. They determined that their perfections in reason and analogy were beyond refutation and that they excelled even God in knowledge of the world and its workings. They said, 'With our understanding, we will build a tower and will ascend to the heavens like gods and put our throne above His throne!'

Israel was the fairest of nations in the eyes of God. Yet for Him, the beauty of the bride is no veil to conceal her wickedness.

*The loveliness of her has warped the mind,*
*Believing her has left you mad and blind,*
*That hyacinths have blossomed is no proof,*
*That Spring is true or virtuous or kind.*

So God cast them down and dispersed them, and stole the words from their mouths. Like Moses, they were stammerers who would speak so beautifully again only when God put the words in their mouths. The angels wept when the voices of men became silent and they petitioned God. But God refused. Only His prophets would speak so beautifully again.

Shayba said, "Do you speak this language? Can you teach it to us?"

Siraaj said, "I do not speak it; I cannot teach it. But the one in your arms will speak it to your tribe. He will be the last to speak only to a portion of mankind. The prophets after will teach the world. As for me, I was the slave of a king who himself was a slave. I am now the servant of a little child. I presume only to be in his service.

I had no certain knowledge before today. I knew, but possessed no real knowledge. I served, but my service was inadequate. I obeyed, but every time with doubt in my heart. I said, 'Since You are the fountain of my soul's youth, why begrudge me a drink?' Now He has served me the wine of knowledge from His cup. He has led me to Joseph; He has caressed my face with His shirt and my blindness is gone."

Shayba said, "I am sorry that your king is dead."

"Today the king is with his King."

Siraaj then grew quiet. Shayba brought him a little water from the well. Siraaj drank the water he was offered and thanked Shayba. Siraaj handed Abraha's sword to Shayba and said, "Take this weapon. It belongs to this child and his family. With this sword, Abraha's cause will be vindicated, your iniquities will be punished and this tribe will be saved. Though some will claim this sword was taken from the Jews, it has always belonged to Him"

Siraaj turned to leave the shrine. Shayba took his arm. "Before you go, bless my son's boy. Put your hand on him and give him your blessing and the blessing of your master."

Siraaj smiled. "The boy has no need for my blessing. I am in need of his."

viii.

The pen is pressed to paper. Solve the mystery of the pen by looking to the hand that holds it. Solve the mystery of the hand by looking to the master of the hand. Instead, we are dumbfounded by words on paper. "These are arbitrary! These scribblings are meaningless." If you do not find the author self-evident, why not assume that the words made for themselves order and sense?

If a man's heart is pierced by an arrow, the fool speaks only of the arrow. The scholar speaks of the bow. The theologian speaks of the hand upon the bow. Only a few discern the eye of the

Archer. A step is not saved in understanding by ignoring Him. Reason will not find Him. But you may yet glimpse Him.

He transcends our measurements; why must you measure Him? If there is beauty and majesty in this cosmos, He is most beautiful and majestic. Whenever a man speaks of "accident," he speaks of his own incomprehension. With our reasoning minds we make ourselves arbiters of the world's meaning. We take on faith only where pride permits. We accept only what we measure by our feeble reason and our dull senses.

We regard ourselves seers of all beginnings; and judges of all endings. Here we determine a matter conceived; and there a matter concluded. Yet we live and die utterly ignorant. What has our knowledge availed us where death and fear of death intervene? "Here," we cry out, "the matter is concluded!"

If I have ever spoken of Him as the First Cause, forgive my impudence. In truth, He is above all causes; He transcends all that can be said of Him.

Balaam said to the houri, "I cannot see Him."

The houri said, "He is near."

Balaam said, "Does He walk among living men?"

"He is nearer."

"Is He before our eyes?"

"He is nearer to you than that."

Balaam asked, "Is He as close to me as the width of a hair?"

"A hair's width is a month's journey compared to His nearness to you."

"Is He within me?"

The houri said, "Quiet. Others may hear you and accuse us of impiety for speaking like this. Remember Hallaj."

Balaam said, "Words are blasphemous or inadequate to speak of Him."

The houri said, "God is infinite; His creation is limited. Only by analogy does the droplet know the ocean. We call Him infinite, though our words are insufficient to describe it. But our argument

is not moved forward by concessions to our inadequacy. We may yet gain a little understanding."

Balaam shut his eyes as if in thought and whispered, "Tell me a little about the nature of the worlds of God. Perhaps it will comfort me before His servants kill me."

The houri said "The world of this creation is bounded. The world seems infinite, but is a fountain of water pouring back into itself. Creation is like the globe, walk any distance and you may do so forever. It is like the circle; follow the line, it never ends. Yet He never repeats.

God is infinitely everywhere in this world. He, furthermore, transcends the world infinitely. He is everywhere beyond every thing. Draw in your mind a circle to represent His presence. Imagine that what we perceive within the circle is the limit of our vision to take in the infinite.

How should we represent the created world we inhabit within the view of the infinite? We might simply place it anywhere, for everywhere and nowhere is the center of Him, as a black dot. Concede that our world will appear within that infinity, that it will not be invisible. We make that concession grudgingly; it is a concession of our existence.

What of another creation inconceivable to us and outside our view and many times larger in size and scope? How will it appear within that circle, beside our world? It will appear as another dot. Both universes, the one in which we live and the imagined one of larger scale, are neither more nor less significant than the other relative to infinity. However tall you grow, you will not reach it. However long you climb, you will not scale it. If you climb a thousand years or for a second, you have in neither case come closer."

Balaam said, "If this is His nature and the nature of His creation, how is it possible that He should be concerned with me? He has all the world, known to us and unknown, visible and invisible, to tend. How can I be of concern to Him to Whom

the worlds themselves are but motes of dust? Surely He will have forgotten me."

The houri said, "If we remove you from His created world and place you beside it, how shall we represent you? Another dot—neither larger nor smaller, in the scale of infinity, than the world of creation that encompassed you. However small, you are not smaller than any other thing.

Do you see? He is now as close to you as He is close to all things. He takes you in His vision, as He takes in all His creatures, as though you were yourself the world entire. Do you not see? However dwarfed you are by the scale of finite things, however insignificant you seem. However long or however briefly you live, you have not approached Him, but He approaches you at every moment to the extent that He approaches all the worlds that He encompasses.

His knowledge of you is complete. Your knowledge of yourself is imperfect. Through Him you are revealed. Without Him, there is nothing."

Balaam said, "If I am the smallest shard of broken glass, I may yet reflect a little light."

When the Israelites lay hold of Balaam, they tore off his mantle and threw him to the ground. Balaam said, "Give me a moment to speak; to prepare my soul."

But the Israelites were not interested in his repentance. They thrust their swords into him and hacked at his limbs.

Dying in the dust, his hands amputated, his belly slit open, Balaam lingered a moment; he said, "There is no God but the God in whom the children of Israel believe. I surrender."

The Israelites mocked him and said, "Now? You surrender to us when you are already in our power?"

Before they cut his throat, Balaam said, "There was time and reason enough to repent. I have come to the end of both, to the end of myself. My ghost will rest. I surrender to Him though

His power over me was always complete and in this there are meanings for you to unlock."

The Israelites wondered at this, but turned their backs on him at last. And when he was dead, the houri stretched out her arm and caressed Balaam's face. She smiled sadly and said, "Remember how He came to tell the story of us. Before this Hand put ink for blood into our veins, what were we? A moment ago, nothing. A moment from now, nothing again. But, for a few words, perhaps immortal, perhaps imperishable, we live. Remember the One Who, with a few strokes of His pen, gave us life and breath and gave us passion and a part of Himself as His gift. Remember that He gave life to us and, in as many strokes of the pen, He takes it away. In this, He is perfectly just and right. He lifts His hand from this page and the world ceases even to exist."